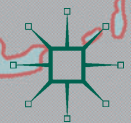


Dennis P. Hupchick  
THE BULGARIAN-BYZANTINE  
WARS FOR EARLY MEDIEVAL  
BALKAN HEGEMONY

*Silver-Lined Skulls  
and Blinded Armies*



# The Bulgarian-Byzantine Wars for Early Medieval Balkan Hegemony

Dennis P. Hupchick

The Bulgarian-  
Byzantine Wars for  
Early Medieval Balkan  
Hegemony

Silver-Lined Skulls and Blinded Armies

palgrave  
macmillan

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Wilkes-Barre, PA, USA

ISBN 978-3-319-56205-6      ISBN 978-3-319-56206-3 (eBook)  
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-56206-3

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017937934

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Cover image: © Map created by Anne-Marie Hupchick

Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by Springer Nature  
The registered company is Springer International Publishing AG  
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

*In memory of a master medievalist  
who befriended me,  
Ivan Duichev*

## PREFACE

The history of the Balkans from the early ninth to the early eleventh century was dominated by a series of deadly conflicts between Bulgaria and the Byzantine Empire for hegemony in the region. As the direct continuation of the Eastern Roman Empire, which had not succumbed to the inroads of migrating barbarians as had its sister half in the west, Byzantium laid claim to the Balkan Peninsula as an imperial birthright that could not be relinquished. On the other hand, Bulgaria, a young “barbarian” state that was newly “civilized” along lines modeled after its Byzantine neighbor, viewed the Balkans as an arena for demonstrating youthful superiority over an elderly mentor by winning its possession from Byzantium. For much of the two-century-long period of generational conflict, youth appeared to hold the upper hand, with Bulgaria winning control of much of the peninsula. In the end, however, the resourcefulness and experience of age prevailed—the Byzantine Empire won an overwhelming victory and its upstart adversary was subjugated completely.

Few early medieval European military conflicts compared to the Bulgarian-Byzantine struggle in terms of scope, scale, and duration. The collective campaigns of the Frank ruler Charlemagne, extending from 772 to 812, came the closest. In territorial scope, both the Bulgarian-Byzantine wars and those of Charlemagne ranged over vast areas with their resident populations. The former eventually drew in nearly all of the Balkan Peninsula while the latter encompassed most of Germany,

parts of Italy, the Netherlands, Pyrenees Spain, western Hungary, and the northwestern Balkans. Regarding the scope of their historical implications, by the time they came to their ends, both the Bulgarian-Byzantine and Charlemagne's wars solidified the cultural configuration of two distinct European civilizations—Eastern and Western—that primarily were distinguished by their Christian religious beliefs (Orthodoxy in the East; Roman Catholicism in the West) and political mentalities (autocratic centralization in the East; individualistic decentralization in the West).

Although Charlemagne's campaigns roughly were comparable in scope to the Bulgarian-Byzantine wars, such was not the case in terms of scale. The military forces involved in the wars of Bulgaria with Byzantium were larger, better organized, and more diverse than those of Charlemagne's Franks and their assorted enemies. While Charlemagne's main army in any given campaign numbered some 8000 men (mainly infantry, with some cavalry), the Bulgarians and Byzantines fielded forces averaging between 15,000 and 30,000 troops (with cavalry constituting a quarter to half of their number). Moreover, Byzantium often made use of its fleet (some 200 available vessels with attendant sailors and marines) in operations against Bulgaria along the Black Sea coast and on the Danube River, adding a naval component that the Franks lacked. Also missing in Charlemagne's operations were the kinds of military coalitions with outside forces either formed or attempted by both the Bulgarians and the Byzantines. Magyars, Pechenegs (Patzinaks), Serbs, Croats, Arabs, and Kievan Rus' were recruited by one side or the other during the two-century-long conflict in the Balkans, lending it an international component not found in the west during early medieval times.

The Byzantine land army of the wars with Bulgaria was the best organized, armed, and supplied, as well as the most efficient, disciplined, and professionally led, military force in early medieval Europe. Its officers had available to them treatises analyzing military tactics, strategy, and intelligence information for use against enemies (real or potential), and they frequently drew on revered Roman military traditions to instill an unsurpassed *esprit de corps* among their troops. The Bulgarians, forced to face the Byzantine military machine for over two centuries, extensively borrowed from their enemy elements of organization, armament, and strategy that they added to their own original steppe tactical and disciplinary traditions, enabling them to survive and thrive for as long as they did. Charlemagne's military system, although more disciplined

and organized than any that had emerged in the west since the Western Roman Empire's collapse four centuries earlier, was crude by comparison with Byzantium's and fell somewhat short of Bulgaria's. While the Franks eventually placed great emphasis on maintaining a siege train in their field force, they never had to deal with the sort of extensive, strong, stone-and-brick fortifications faced by both sides in the Bulgarian-Byzantine wars. (The triple land walls of Constantinople, Byzantium's capital, were the longest and strongest set of medieval fortifications erected in Europe and often played a crucial role in the wars with Bulgaria.)

The scale of violence involved in any early medieval conflict was frightful. Man-to-man combat with such basic but deadly hand weapons as swords, daggers, maces, spears, axes, bows, and even clubs, slings, and stones was bloody and brutal. In the heat of combat, emotions ran hot and the immediacy of the "kill-or-be-killed" instinct often led to atrocities. At times, however, commanders intentionally employed savagery against the enemy for psychological or propagandistic purposes. Perhaps surprisingly, given the fact that the contenders generally stood at an uneven but higher stage of "civilized" development than did the Franks, in the Bulgarian-Byzantine wars such "object lessons" were more common than in those of Charlemagne.

The subtitle of this book, although appearing grisly at first glance, actually refers to two "object-lesson" episodes that serve as figurative "bookends" to the period of the Bulgarian-Byzantine wars, emphasizing the continuous level of ferocity that characterized the conflict throughout. Early in the hegemonic struggle (811), after ambushing and destroying a large Byzantine army led by Emperor Nikephoros I (who perished in the fighting), Krum, the victorious Bulgar ruler, had the dead emperor's head removed, the skull sawed off above the eye sockets and lined with silver, and then used it as his ceremonial drinking cup to proclaim Bulgar superiority over Byzantium. Two centuries later (1014), near the end of the protracted struggle, Byzantine Emperor Basil II defeated a Bulgarian force and had hundreds of the surviving captives blinded and sent back to the Bulgarian ruler Samuil (led by one man out of every hundred who was spared an eye for the purpose) to demonstrate Byzantine superiority and to herald the ultimate fate of Bulgaria. It matters little that some modern scholars have cast doubt on the authenticity of both episodes; as circulating tales, they were known and believed in their times and achieved their intended psychological impact on foes and friends alike.



In terms of duration, Charlemagne's wars were confined to his own lifetime (as was the relatively sophisticated level of his military system in the west)—some forty years, including intermittent bouts of peace. In contrast, the Bulgarian-Byzantine hegemonic wars stretched over two centuries and the reigns of a number of rulers on both sides. Although that long period was punctuated by interludes of peace, the cumulative extent of actual warfare totaled well over 60 years, and even the peaceful interludes were not free of recurring armed "incidents."

Despite the obvious immensity of the Bulgarian-Byzantine wars for Balkan hegemony, their story has received scant coverage in western, most especially English-language, military histories of early medieval Europe. While the name of Charlemagne at least is familiar to most in the west, that of Krum, Simeon, or Basil II is known mostly to Bulgarian or Byzantine specialists and students. Why? The same reason for the short shrift often given by western authors of general medieval European histories to, for example, the Mongols or Moors applies to Byzantium and Bulgaria as well: They lay outside the cultural sphere of Western European civilization and thus frequently portrayed as either "foreign" or "threatening" to western historical development. Compounding the problem is the fact that most English-speaking Bulgarian or Byzantine experts have produced studies narrowly targeted at specialized audiences rather than a more general readership. The work that follows, although scholarly in nature, is a modest attempt to broaden awareness of the Bulgarian-Byzantine wars beyond the ranks of dedicated specialists and students alone.

Those English-language accounts of the early medieval struggle between Bulgaria and Byzantium for hegemonic control of the Balkans that do exist usually have appeared in works devoted to Byzantine political or military history. Rarely has the story of the wars been told in English from the Bulgarian perspective. The underlying reasons for such one-sidedness are many. Most of the primary sources treating the conflicts were Byzantine products. Another reason for the paucity of English-language accounts of Bulgaria's early medieval wars with Byzantium is the scarcity of English-speaking historians working in the field of medieval Bulgarian history (or, for that matter, in the field of Bulgarian history in general). That Bulgaria ceased to play a significant role on the world stage after the early medieval period, spent much of its history either subjugated or dominated by foreign world powers, reemerged in the late nineteenth century as a small modern state located

in what most English-speakers consider a “fringe” area of Europe (the Balkans), and sports a localized language illuminates the reasons for this lack of professional interest. There is, of course, no lack of coverage of early medieval Bulgaria and its wars with Byzantium in Bulgarian-language historiography.

By drawing on the fruits of Bulgarian historians’ extensive research and integrating them with available English-language studies, the text that follows attempts to recount the drama and detail of the early medieval wars between Bulgaria and Byzantium for hegemonic control of the Balkans primarily from the Bulgarian side. The main emphasis is placed on military activities. Although military and political developments that are not specifically associated with the details of the hegemonic wars are included to provide the necessary setting for the conflict (as “prelude” to and “interludes” between the various stages of the conflict), the text does not pretend to provide a truly comprehensive history of the First Bulgarian Empire since important cultural (religion, literature, the arts, etc.) and economic matters are treated only when pertinent for the context. Nor does the text venture into describing Byzantine military organization and tactics in minute detail (the recent works of military scholarship by such experts as Warren Treadgold, John Haldon, and others admirably have done so and need not be repeated). With the understanding of these qualifying statements, it is hoped that the following effort will find a receptive audience among those English-speaking specialists, students, and intellectually curious general readers interested in military, Balkan, and medieval history, and make some contribution toward broadening the awareness and appreciation of the important role played by Bulgaria in early medieval Europe.

Wilkes-Barre, PA, USA, 2017

Dennis P. Hupchick

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A number of institutions and individuals deserve thanks for supporting this book project. Research and writing of the manuscript were assisted through a sabbatical granted by the administration and trustees of Wilkes University. Brian Sacolic, chief reference librarian, and Heidi Selecky, acquisitions librarian, at Wilkes University's Farley Library were instrumental in providing bibliographic assistance and access to source materials not readily available in Wilkes-Barre. Significant portions of the draft manuscript were read and commented upon by Dr. Michael Davidson and Henry Hunsinger, although their suggestions were not always followed. A particular debt of gratitude is extended to Vladimir Vladov of the Bulgarian Academy of Science's Sociological Institute for his long-standing friendship, assorted aid during my numerous past visits to Bulgaria, and gifting me with a book that proved inspirational for undertaking this study. Thanks also go to Deborah Arcavage, Wilkes history departmental administrative assistant, for her many acts of assorted support, and to Emily Russell, editor at Palgrave/Macmillan, for forcing me to tighten the prose of the manuscript to make it a better "read." Lastly, I sincerely wish to thank my wife Anne-Marie for producing the final versions of the maps appearing in this volume as well as her often-strained tolerance of her husband's self-absorbed preoccupations with drafting the book.

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## NOTE ON SPELLING AND PRONUNCIATION

An attempt has been made in the text to render most proper names and foreign terms in or near their native spellings. Exceptions to this approach are terms generally better known to English speakers in their anglicized forms (such as the names of states, certain cities, and various geographic elements) and the first names of certain Greek and most Western European individuals. Place-names (excluding the exceptions noted above) are given in their historical Bulgarian or Greek forms, with modern contemporary forms or historical variants provided in parentheses following their initial appearances in the text (identified by: B = Bulgarian; Gr = Greek; Sl = Slavic; L = Latin; m = modern). Most geographic elements are identified by modern names (either anglicized or native). In the case of the Bulgarian and Russian languages written in the Cyrillic alphabet, a “phonetical” transliteration system, generally following that used by the U.S. Board on Geographic Names, is employed, while for Macedonian, Serbian, and Croatian a “linguistic” system based on the Latin alphabet modified by diacritical marks is used. Dates following proper names are regnal.

A guide to the simple phonetical pronunciation of certain foreign letters follows.

**ai** (Greek), **é** (Hungarian):

**á** (Hungarian), **a** (in all cases *except* Hungarian):

**c** (in all cases):

**č, ć** (Serb, Croat, Macedonian), **cs** (Hungarian):

**dj** (Serb, Croat, Macedonian), **gy** (Hungarian):

**e** (in all cases):

**h** (Bulgarian, Serb, Croat, Macedonian, Russian), **kh** (Greek):

**i** (in all cases), **oi** (Greek), **yi** (Hungarian):

**j** (in all cases):

**ó** (Hungarian):

**ő** (Hungarian):

**š** (Serb, Croat, Macedonian), **s** (Hungarian):

**sz** (Hungarian):

**u** (in all cases), **ou** (Greek):

**ü** (Hungarian):

**ù** (Bulgarian), **a** (Hungarian), **ı** (Turkish):

**y** (Greek, Russian):

**ž** (Serb, Croat, Macedonian):

as **long a** in *lay*

as **a** in *paw*

as **ts** in *seats*

as **ch** in *church*

as **dzh** in *badge*

as short **e** in *met*

as **hard ch** in *Bach*

as **ee** in *feet*

as **y** in *yet*

as **long o** in *go*

as **ur** in *urge*

as **sh** in *shot*

as **s** in *say*

as **oo** in *too*

as **yoo** in *milieu*

as **guttural a** in *cut*

as **short i** in *it*

as **zh** in *measure*

# CHRONOLOGY OF THE BULGARIAN-BYZANTINE HEGEMONIC WARS

## *Opening Phase*

- 807 Aborted preemptive campaign by Byzantine Emperor Nikephoros I against the Bulgar state
- 809 (March) Bulgar Han Krum defeats a large Byzantine force in the Struma River valley and then captures and sacks Serdika
- 809 (April) Nikephoros I sacks the Bulgar capital at Pliska but fails to re-secure Serdika
- 811 (11–21 July) Nikephoros I invades the Bulgar state, captures and sacks Pliska, ravages the surrounding countryside, and marches on Serdika
- 811 (26 July) Krum crushes Nikephoros I's army near Vübitsa Pass in the Balkan Mountains; Nikephoros is killed and his skull is fashioned into Krum's silver-lined ceremonial drinking cup
- 812 (April/May) Krum attacks Byzantine northern Thrace and captures Debeltos; the Byzantines abandon their north Thracian fortress line; the Bulgars push their southern border near to Adrianople
- 812 (Fall) The Byzantines rebuff a peace offering made by Krum
- 812 (October) Krum captures Byzantine Mesembria on the Black Sea
- 813 (February) Byzantine Emperor Michael I defeats a Bulgar force near Adrianople
- 813 (22 June) Krum defeats Michael I's army near Versinikia and besieges Adrianople
- 813 (July) Krum fails to take Constantinople, surviving an assassination attempt by Byzantine Emperor Leo V; Krum devastates



- the environs of the city and much of the Aegean coast of Byzantine Thrace
- 813 (August) Krum captures Adrianople and transfers 40,000 captives to the Bulgar state's trans-Danubian regions
- 814 (January) The Bulgars conduct a successful raid into Byzantine Thracian holdings; Arkadiopolis, Bizya, and other cities are sacked and burned; numerous captives and booty are acquired
- 814 (13 April) Krum dies while preparing a new offensive against Constantinople, which thereafter is cancelled because of succession problems
- 815 (Fall) Bulgar Han Omurtag raids Byzantium's Thracian and Macedonian themes
- 816 (March) Leo V defeats a Bulgar force north of Mesembria in the Battle of "Leo's Hill."
- 816 A peace treaty is struck ending Bulgar-Byzantine fighting for over 30 years; the first phase of the hegemonic wars concludes

*Middle Phase*

- 894 (Fall) Bulgar Knyaz Simeon attacks Byzantium in the region of Adrianople over a trade dispute and defeats a Byzantine force commanded by Prokopios Krenites, mutilating his Khazar Byzantine captives
- 895 (Summer) Byzantine Emperor Leo VI launches a military campaign against Simeon in alliance with the Magyars; the Byzantines under Nikephoros Phokas pin the Bulgarians in northern Thrace while the Magyars invade and ravage Dobrudzha and the eastern Danubian Plain; Simeon's forces are defeated by the Magyars in Dobrudzha and he sues for peace; Leo withdraws his forces from Bulgaria before forging a binding treaty
- 895 (Fall) Simeon gains Pecheneg aid and defeats the Magyars, forcing them to migrate to Pannonia; most Bulgarian Pannonian and Transylvanian holdings are lost to the Magyars
- 896 Disputes over prisoner exchange result in Simeon attacking Byzantine Thrace; Simeon defeats the Byzantines under Leo Katakalon at the Battle of Boulgarophygon and threatens Constantinople; Leo VI sues for peace

- 896/897 A treaty ends the warfare between Bulgaria and Byzantium over the trade dispute in Bulgaria's favor; Leo VI agrees to pay Simeon annual tribute
- 901/902 A treaty between Bulgaria and Byzantium results in Simeon returning 30 recently captured Byzantine forts in the vicinity of Dyrrakhion
- 904 Simeon threatens Thessaloniki after the city is taken and sacked by Arab naval marauders; a new treaty with Byzantium preserves Byzantine control of Thessaloniki by granting Simeon expanded holdings in its vicinity as well as in the southern regions of Macedonia and Albania
- 913 (August) Simeon invades Byzantine Thrace in retribution for Byzantium's violation of the 896/897 treaty and threatens Constantinople; the Byzantine regency for underage Emperor Constantine VII, led by Patriarch Nicholas Mystikos, negotiates a new treaty with Simeon granting him imperial status and a betrothal of one of his daughters to the young Byzantine emperor; Simeon is crowned by Mystikos as Bulgarian emperor (*tsar*) at the Hebdomon Palace
- 914 Mystikos's regency is overthrown by Constantine VII's mother Zoë, who abrogates the concessions granted Simeon at the Hebdomon; Simeon invades Byzantine territory and captures Adrianople; Zoë is constrained to reinstate the Hebdomon terms to recover the city but does so grudgingly
- 915–916 Tsar Simeon conducts military demonstrations against Byzantium in the vicinities of Thessaloniki and Dyrrakhion to force Zoë's regency to abide by the Hebdomon terms; both Simeon and Byzantium attempt to win the Pechenegs as allies
- 917 The Byzantines form an anti-Bulgarian military alliance with the Raškan Serbs and the Pechenegs intending to deal Bulgaria a crushing blow through a concerted assault; Simeon manages to neutralize the Serbs and may have bought off the Pechenegs, preventing them from attacking south of the Danube
- 917 (20 August) Simeon crushes a large invading Byzantine force on the Black Sea coastal plain between Ankhialos and Mesembria at the Battle of Aheloi (Simeon's greatest military victory)
- 917 (September) At Katasyrtai, a Thacian suburb of Constantinople, Simeon defeats the Byzantines in a night attack on their camp;

- unable to breach Constantinople's defenses, Simeon retires to Bulgaria
- 917 (Fall) A Bulgarian force invades Raška, deposes and captures its prince, and installs in his place Pavle Branović as Bulgarian client ruler
- 918 Simeon invades Byzantine mainland Greece as far south as Corinth, sacking Thebes and ravaging the countryside; mainland Greece is devastated and militarily weakened
- 919 After arranging for naval assistance from the Tarsus Arabs, Simeon invades Byzantine Thrace to the Dardanelles, but the expected Arab fleet is turned back by the Byzantine navy; Byzantine *basileopater* Romanos Lekapenos, acting head of state, attempts to divert Simeon by replacing Branović on the Raškan throne with pro-Byzantine Zaharije Pribislavljević, but Branović defeats the effort; Zaharije is captured and sent to Simeon's capital at Preslav under house arrest
- 920 Lekapenos becomes co-emperor with Constantine VII and distracts Simeon's attention from his move by instigating Branović to defect from his Bulgarian allegiance; Simeon spends the year's campaigning season fighting the Raškan Serbs before succeeding in replacing Branović with Zaharije as his new Raškan puppet prince
- 921 (March) Simeon invades Byzantine Thrace and threatens Constantinople, defeating a Byzantine reconnaissance force at Thermopolis; a Byzantine tagmatic force is crushed near Pegai on the Golden Horn with heavy Byzantine losses; Constantinople's Golden Horn and Bosphoros suburbs are ravaged but Simeon is forced to retire to Western Thrace
- 921 (Summer) Simeon sends a force to mainland Greece in support of a Slavic revolt against Byzantium in the Peloponnese (March-November)
- 922 Simeon invades Byzantine Thrace, capturing a number of fortresses and their surrounding territories; a Bulgarian raiding force threatens the suburbs of Constantinople and fights off a Byzantine attack on its base camp
- 922 (August) The Bulgarians lead a Slavic army in Greece on a campaign of conquest; they overrun much of mainland Greece and part of northern Peloponnese, holding those lands taken in Simeon's name
- 923 Simeon conducts a prolonged siege of Adrianople; the garrison succumbs to starvation and surrenders; Simeon

- retreats to Bulgaria; the Bulgarian garrison installed in Adrianople abandons the city soon after
- 923 (Fall) Raškan Prince Zaharije defects from Bulgarian suzerainty and raises the Serb tribes against Simeon; he thoroughly defeats a Bulgarian force and has the dead Bulgarian commanders' decapitated heads and armor sent to Byzantine Emperor Romanos I in Constantinople
- 923–924 (Winter) Simeon attempts to forge an alliance with the Fatimid *khalifate* for naval assistance against Constantinople; the Bulgarian-Fatimid treaty is revealed to Romanos I after the ship carrying a copy and ambassadors is captured; Romanos I's friendly treatment of the Fatimid ambassadors leads the Fatimid *khalife* to abandon his treaty with Simeon
- 924 (Summer) Simeon invades Byzantine Thrace and threatens Constantinople; Simeon learns that the Fatimid treaty has fallen through and offers to discuss terms for ending hostilities with Romanos I
- 924 (9 September) Simeon and Romanos I meet outside of Constantinople's walls and a truce is negotiated, which includes: Byzantine recognition of Simeon's imperial title; reinstatement of Byzantine tribute payments to Simeon; and Simeon returning all Byzantine towns and lands captured by his forces after 917
- 924 (Fall) Simeon attacks Raškan Serbia, ostensibly to replace Zaharije with a new client prince, Časlav Klonimirović, but actually to conquer the principality outright; Zaharije flees to Croatia and all the Serb *župani*, including Časlav, are arrested; the Bulgarians overrun Raška and deport most of its inhabitants to Bulgaria; Raška is rendered an uninhabited western frontier region of Bulgaria
- 926 (May) Simeon dispatches an invasion force against Croatia, ruled by Byzantine ally King Tomislav; Tomislav crushes the invading Bulgarians in a battle fought in the Dinaric Mountains; Simeon sues for peace
- 927 (late Winter) A peace treaty between Simeon and Tomislav is struck; soon thereafter Simeon dies (27 May)
- 927 (Summer) Bulgarian Tsar Petūr I invades Byzantine Thrace, breaking the truce and ravaging the countryside; Byzantine Emperor Romanos I requests peace negotiations
- 927 (October) A treaty is struck in Constantinople officially ending the hostilities between Bulgaria and Byzantium that began in 917; the terms grant official Byzantine recognition of

both Petūr's imperial title and the Bulgarian Orthodox patriarchate previously decreed by Simeon, reestablishes the two empires' common border as defined in the treaties of 896/897 and 904, and grants perpetual precedence to Bulgarian ambassadors at the Byzantine court; the treaty is cemented by the marriage of Tsar Petūr to the granddaughter of Romanos I, Maria Lekapena; the hegemonic wars' middle phase ends

*Closing Phase*

- 976 The Komitopuli (four western Bulgarian *bolyari* and brothers) initiate military operations against Byzantine possessions in former Bulgarian lands (southern and southeastern Macedonia, the Danubian regions) aimed at reestablishing the Bulgarian Empire, initiating the final phase of the hegemonic wars; two of the brothers are killed: Moisei at Serres and David at Fair Oak Woods; the youngest brother Samuil asserts predominant military and political authority
- 977 Former Tsar Boris II and his brother Roman escape captivity in Constantinople and flee to the western Bulgarian lands; Boris is killed at the border but Roman is proclaimed rightful Bulgarian *tsar*; Samuil and Aron, the surviving Komitopuli, are designated Tsar Roman's chief commanders and administrators
- 977–986 Samuil leads major raids on Byzantine Thessaly, capturing a number of fortresses
- 986 (Spring) Samuil captures Larisa in Thessaly; Byzantine Emperor Basil II makes an unsuccessful attempt to divide the Bulgarians' leadership through a botched diplomatic overture to Aron
- 986 (July) Basil II invades Bulgaria, aiming to capture the strategically important Sofia Basin; Basil conducts an unsuccessful siege of Sredets, lasting 20 days (into August), and then retreats
- 986 (17 August) Samuil ambushes and destroys Basil II's retreating army in the Battle of "Trajan's Gate," a pass in the Sredna Gora Mountains
- 986–987 Samuil overruns and recovers most of the eastern Bulgarian territories on the Danubian Plain and in Dobrudzha formerly lost to Emperor Tzimiskes in 971

- 987/988 (14 June) Samuil murders his brother Aron, presumably because of his pro-Byzantine sympathies; Samuil solidifies his dominant military and political position
- 987–989 Samuil threatens the vicinity of Thessaloniki and overruns the nearby Byzantine themes of Beroia and Drougoubiteia, capturing the fortresses of Beroia and Servia
- 989(?)  
991–994 Samuil acquires control of Dyrrakhion on terms Emperor Basil II conducts military operations to recover control of former Byzantine holdings in southern Macedonia and northern Greece lost to Samuil; Basil regains Beroia and other undocumented fortresses while forging anti-Bulgarian alliances with Duklja, Croatia, and Venice
- 991(?) Bulgarian Tsar Roman is captured by the Byzantines and kept under house arrest in Constantinople until his death
- 994–995 Samuil conducts continuing raids in the vicinity of Thessaloniki
- 995 Samuil defeats and kills Thessalonikan *doux* Gregory Taronites and captures his son Ashot; new *doux* John Khaldos is defeated by Samuil and captured, subsequently spending 22 years in Bulgarian captivity; the Bulgarians regain possession of Beroia and some other positions previously lost to Basil II
- 996 (Spring) Samuil invades mainland Greece as far south as the Isthmus of Corinth, sacking the towns of Salona and Galaxidion, among others
- 996 Byzantine *Doux* Nikephoros Ouranos reconsolidates Byzantine control in vicinities around Thessaloniki and then pushes into Thessaly, recapturing Larisa; advancing on Samuil's rear in Greece, Ouranos soundly defeats Samuil at the Battle of the Sperkheios River, forcing the Bulgarians to retreat into Macedonia
- 997 Samuil's diplomatic effort to forge a peace accommodation with Basil II is cut short by news of Tsar Roman's death in Constantinople; Samuil is proclaimed Bulgarian *tsar*, ruling from his capital at Ohrid
- 998 Tsar Samuil leads a military campaign against Byzantine allies in the Dalmatian and Serbian regions of the north-western Balkans; Dukljan Knez Jovan Vladimir surrenders and is imprisoned; the Bulgarian siege of Ulcinj fails but Kotor is captured; Dubrovnik's hinterland is ravaged;

- the Dalmatian coastal regions are devastated as far north as Zadar in Croatia; Bosnia and Raška are forced into Bulgarian clientage, as are Zeta, Trebinje, and Srem; Jovan Vladimir is married to a daughter of Samuil and returned to his throne in Duklja as a Bulgarian vassal; an alliance is forged with Prince István, ruler of the Magyars, sealed by a marriage of Samuil's son Gavril Radomir to István's daughter; Samuil's Bulgaria achieves its greatest territorial extent
- 999 Basil II leads a successful campaign to capture Sredets and the Sofia Basin
- 1000 (or 1001) Byzantine generals Theodorokanos and Nikephoros Xiphias defeat the Bulgarians on the Danubian Plain and in Dobrudzha, recapturing Preslav, Pliska, and Pereyaslavets
- 1001 Basil II campaigns against the Bulgarians in the vicinity of Thessaloniki, capturing Beroia, Kolydros, and Servia and transferring their inhabitants to Boleron; Basil expels the Bulgarians from northern Thessaly; Basil invades Bulgarian southeastern Macedonia and takes Voden
- 1002 Basil II places the northern Bulgarian fortress of Vidin under siege (April/May), which lasts for eight months before succeeding (December); Samuil launches a diversionary strike against Byzantium's Strymon and Macedonian themes, sacking Adrianople (15 August), but fails to pry Basil away from Vidin
- 1003 Basil II leads a strike from Vidin against northern Macedonia and Skopje, capturing Naissos along the way; Samuil is thoroughly defeated by Basil at the Battle of the Vardar River, outside Skopje, and Skopje's Bulgarian commander promptly surrenders; Basil marches against Pernik, in the upper Struma River region, first taking Velbŭzhd fortress; Pernik's commander Krakra successfully resists all of Basil's military and diplomatic efforts; Basil calls off the siege and retires to Constantinople
- 1005(?) Dyrrakhion is returned to Byzantine control through the betrayal of Ashot, son-in-law of Samuil and the supposed Bulgarian client ruler of the city; a possible truce or peace treaty is arranged between Samuil and Basil
- 1005–1014 Period of possible low-level fighting between Bulgaria and Byzantium; the Bulgarians may have re-acquired control of Beroia and Sredets

- 1014 (Summer) Basil II launches a strike against Bulgarian positions in the lower Struma River region and pushes through Kimbalonga toward the Macedonian fortress of Strumitsa but is stopped by Bulgarian fortifications spanning the Klyuch Pass; Samuil dispatches David Nestoritsa to conduct diversionary raids in the Thessaloniki vicinity but he is defeated by that city's *doux*, Botaneiates; Samuil and his retinue move to Strumitsa to reinforce the troops guarding Klyuch, who inflict bloody repulses on Basil's attempts to force the pass
- 1014 (29 July) At the Battle of Klyuch Pass, Basil II's general Nikephoros Xiphias successfully outflanks the Bulgarians' blocking position at Klyuch and falls on their rear while Basil launches a frontal attack; the Bulgarians break and flee toward Strumitsa; Samuil unsuccessfully attempts to stem the Byzantine onslaught near the fort of Makrievo and flees to Prilep; numerous Bulgarians are taken captive; Basil reduces the Makrievo fort but makes no serious attempt on Strumitsa, where Samuil's son Gavril Radomir rallies the defeated Bulgarian troops
- 1014 (August?) The Bulgarians under Nestoritsa and/or Gavril Radomir defeat an approaching Byzantine force led by Botaneiates in a southern Macedonian mountain pass; Botaneiates is killed; Basil II retreats from before Strumitsa and returns to the southern Struma River valley, where he captures the Bulgarian fortress of Melnik before retiring to Mosynopolis
- 1014 (October) Samuil dies (6 October) and is succeeded by Gavril Radomir; Basil II advances into Bulgarian southern Macedonia and captures Bitola, Prilep, and Shtip in a show of force aimed at the new Bulgarian *tsar*; Bitola and Prilep are swiftly evacuated by Basil and Gavril Radomir sues for peace in a diplomatic ploy to gain time to solidify his authority
- 1015 (Spring) Tsar Gavril Radomir conducts raids against Byzantine positions in the Balkans, regaining some strongholds previously lost (Beroia and Sredets[?]); Basil II suppresses a Bulgarian uprising in Voden (April) after a prolonged siege; the Byzantines lay siege to Mŭglen but make slow headway; Basil takes personal charge of the siege, undermines the fortress's walls, and deports the captured



- garrison to Vaspurakan in Anatolia; the nearby Bulgarian fort of Enotia falls
- 1015 (August) Tsar Gavril Radomir is assassinated and succeeded by his cousin Ivan Vladislav; Tsar Ivan Vladislav sues for peace but a failed Byzantine-supported attempt on his life leads him to initiate military operations against Dyrrakhion in retaliation
- 1015 (Fall) Basil II invades south-central Macedonia, reducing the fortresses of Sosk and Ostrovo and devastating the Bitola Plain; all Bulgarian captives are blinded as rebels; Basil occupies the civilian quarters of the Bulgarian capital at Ohrid but fails to take the citadel; while Basil marches toward the Adriatic, his rearguard is massacred by Bulgarians under Ivats in the mountains near Bitola; Basil returns to Macedonia but fails to bring the Bulgarians to battle and retires through Mosynopolis to Constantinople; Ivats recovers Ohrid; Byzantine forces capture the fortresses of Thermitsa and Boyana; Ivan Vladislav fails to take Dyrrakhion and blames Dukljan Knez Jovan Vladimir for the outcome
- 1016 (Spring) Tsar Ivan Vladislav has Jovan Vladimir murdered (22 May), after which he moves his court to recently re-fortified Bitola, which serves as a primary stronghold against Byzantine attacks from Voden; Ivan Vladislav also may have undertaken unsuccessful military efforts against Dyrrakhion
- 1016 (Fall) Basil II advances up the Struma River valley and lays siege to Krakra's stronghold of Pernik; Basil terminates the siege after 88 days of unsuccessful and costly effort and retires to Mosynopolis
- 1017 (Spring) Basil II invades the southern Macedonian region of Kastoria while mounting diversionary operations on the Bitola Plain; Basil captures the fortress of Longos but fails to take Kastoria; news that Krakra had forged a Bulgarian-Pecheneg alliance draws Basil northward, capturing Bozhigrad and Servia along the way; the Bulgarian-Pecheneg alliance is foiled by Byzantine diplomacy so Basil turns to invading south-central Macedonia, capturing the fortress of Setina; Ivan Vladislav advances to meet the Byzantines and entraps a Byzantine strike force under Doux Diogenes west of Setina, but he is ingloriously driven off by Basil

- 1018 (February) Tsar Ivan Vladislav is killed in battle at Dyrrakhion, plunging Bulgarian leadership into disarray and breaking the Bulgarian *bolyari's* will to persist in anti-Byzantine war efforts
- 1018 (Spring) Basil II advances on the upper Struma and Sofia Basin regions but the operation is cut short when the regional Bulgarian commander Krakra surrenders Pernik and 35 other fortresses to Basil at Adrianople, opening the flood-gates for similar Bulgarian capitulations; Basil marches to south-central Macedonia and receives the submission of Bitola, Morozda, Lipljan, and Strumitsa, along with their *bolyar* commanders, as well as of most members of the Bulgarian imperial family, high government functionaries, and the Bulgarian Orthodox patriarch; all Bulgarian imperial and *bolyar* notables who submit are granted high Byzantine ranks, dignities, and titles by Basil; Basil names Areianites *katepano* of Bulgaria at Skopje
- 1018 (Summer) Basil II receives the submission of Ohrid, Bulgaria's capital, and confiscates the Bulgarian imperial treasury; increasing numbers of *bolyari* submit to Basil in return for prestigious rewards; Evstathios Daphnomeles is named *strategos* of Ohrid; Basil marches to Prespa and Devol while Daphnomeles assists him in dealing with bands of diehard anti-Byzantine Bulgarians, led by the three eldest sons of Ivan Vladislav and by the *bolyar* Ivats, holed up in the nearby Tomor Mountains; the three brothers eventually give themselves up to Basil in return for rich rewards and Ivats is captured and imprisoned, leading to the collapse of the remaining Bulgarian resistance in the southern regions of the former empire; Basil marches to Athens, where he celebrates an Orthodox victory mass in the Parthenon (now a church) before returning to Constantinople
- 1018/1019 The last stronghold of Bulgarian resistance against the Byzantine conquest of Bulgaria, in the northern, middle Danubian region of Srem, is suppressed by Constantine Digenes after he murders the Bulgarians' leader Sermon and takes their primary fortress at Srem; the final phase of the hegemonic wars comes to a close and Bulgaria lies completely under Byzantine authority
- 1019 (Spring) Basil II celebrates an official triumph at Constantinople in honor of his Bulgarian conquests

## ABBREVIATIONS

AB	<i>The Annals of St-Bertin</i>
AF	<i>The Annals of Fulda</i>
Bb	<i>Byzantinobulgarica</i>
BCH	<i>Bulletin de correspondance hellénique</i>
BHR	<i>Bulgarian Historical Review</i>
BIB	<i>Bŭlgarska istoricheska biblioteka</i>
BMGS	<i>Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies</i>
Bs	<i>Byzantinoslavica</i>
BS/EB	<i>Byzantine Studies/Études Byzantines</i>
BVA	<i>Bŭlgarski voenen atlas</i>
BVIF	<i>Bŭlgarskoto voenno izkustvo prez feodalizma</i>
BVIpId	<i>Bŭlgarska voenna istoriya: Podbrani izvori i dokumenti</i>
BVM	<i>Bŭlgarska voenna misŭl</i>
BZ	<i>Byzantinische Zeitschrift</i>
“Chronicle of 811”	“‘About the Emperor Nikephoros and How He Leaves His Bones in Bulgaria:’ A Context for the Controversial ‘Chronicle of 811’”
DAI	<i>De Administrando Imperio</i>
DOP	<i>Dumbarton Oaks Papers</i>
EA	<i>Epigraphica Anatolica</i>
EB	<i>Études balkaniques</i>
EEQ	<i>East European Quarterly</i>
EH	<i>Études historiques</i>
EHB	<i>The Economic History of Byzantium</i>
EHR	<i>English Historical Review</i>

EME	<i>Early Medieval Europe</i>
ERE	<i>A History of the Eastern Roman Empire from the Fall of Irene to the Accession of Basil I (802–867)</i>
GDA	<i>Godišnik na Dubovnata akademiya</i>
GIBI	<i>Grütski izvori za búlgarskata istoriya</i>
GMPM-S	<i>Godišnik na Natsionalniya politicheski muzei—Sofiya</i>
GSubf	<i>Godišnik na Sofiiskiyya universitet, bogoslavski fakultet</i>
GSUff	<i>Godišnik na Sofiiskiyya universitet, filozofsko-istoricheski fakultet</i>
GSUif	<i>Godišnik na Sofiiskiyya universitet, istoricheski fakultet</i>
GSUiff	<i>Godišnik na Sofiiskiyya universitet, istorichesko-filozofski fakultet</i>
GSUyuf	<i>Godišnik na Sofiiskiyya universitet, yuridicheski fakultet</i>
HUS	<i>Harvard Ukrainian Studies</i>
IB 2	<i>Istoriya na Búlgariya 2, Púrvva búlgarska dúrzhava</i>
IB 5 VI	<i>Istoriya na Búlgariya 5, Voenna istoriya na búlgarite ot drevnostta do nashi dni</i>
IBAI	<i>Izvestiya na Búlgarskiya arheologicheski institut</i>
IBDSV 1/1; 1/2; 2	<i>Istoriya na búlgarskata dúrzhava prez srednite vekove 1, pt. 1; 1, pt. 2; 2</i>
IBID	<i>Izvestiya na Búlgarskoto istorichesko druzhestvo</i>
IBN 1	<i>Istoriya na búlgarskiya narod, pt. 1, Púrvvo búlgarsko tsarstvo</i>
IBI	<i>Izvestiya na Institut za búlgarska istoriya</i>
IID	<i>Izvestiya na Istoricheskoto druzhestvo v Sofiya</i>
III	<i>Izvestiya na Institut za istoriya</i>
INIM	<i>Izvestiya na Natsionalniya istoricheski muzei</i>
INMuz—Varna	<i>Izvestiya na Narodniya muzei—Varna</i>
INVM	<i>Izvestiya na Natsionalniya voennoistoricheski muzei</i>
Ipr	<i>Istoricheski pregled</i>
IVID	<i>Izvestiya na Voennoto istorichesko druzhestvo</i>
IVND	<i>Izvestiya na Voennoistoricheskoto nauchno druzhestvo</i>
JHS	<i>Journal of Hellenic Studies</i>
JÖB	<i>Jahrbuch für Österreichische Byzantinistik</i>
JÖBG	<i>Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinischen Gesellschaft</i>
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
LIBI	<i>Latinski izvori za búlgarskata istoriya</i>
LPD	<i>Letopis Popa Dukljanina</i>
NCMH	<i>New Cambridge Medieval History</i>
ODB	<i>The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium</i>
PO	<i>Patrologia orientalis</i>
REB	<i>Revue des études Byzantines</i>

RFA	<i>The Royal Frankish Annals</i>
RPC	<i>The Russian Primary Chronicle: Laurentian Text</i>
RSBS	<i>Revista di Studi Bizantini e Slavi</i>
SB	<i>Studia Balcanica</i>
SbBAN	<i>Sbornik na Bŭlgarskata akademiya na naukite</i>
SD	<i>Sotsialno delo</i>
SEER	<i>Slavonic and East European Revue</i>
Sf	<i>Südöstforschungen</i>
SMRH	<i>Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History</i>
TM	<i>Travaux et mémoires (du Centre de recherche d'histoire et civilisation de Byzance)</i>
VISb	<i>Voенно-istoricheski sbornik</i>
ZRVI	<i>Zbornik Radova Vizantinoloskog Instituta</i>

## Introduction: The Belligerents

For two centuries, from the early ninth to the early eleventh, Bulgaria and the Byzantine Empire engaged in what ultimately proved to be a “life-and-death” struggle for hegemonic control of Europe’s Balkan Peninsula. The Balkans jut southward from the European landmass into the eastern Mediterranean Sea, bounded by the Adriatic, Aegean, Marmara, and Black seas. The peninsula’s location in the eastern Mediterranean makes it a strategic crossroads of three continents—Europe, Asia, and Africa—and a focus of human contention. This is so despite the region’s difficult terrain, sparse resources, and limited lines of communication.

Mountains—many of them densely forested—cover more than 70% of the peninsula, limiting and restricting habitation and agriculture, and posing difficult problems for conducting military operations, especially during the early medieval period. The available Roman road network was primitive and constricted by Roman standards, further limiting operational capabilities.<sup>1</sup> Climatically, the peninsula enjoys Mediterranean-type weather along its coasts and a continental one throughout its interior. Most campaigns during the hegemonic wars were conducted either in the peninsula’s interior, continental climate zone or in Thrace, which enjoys mixed continental-Mediterranean weather. “Campaigning season” during the wars usually extended from April through October, when climatic conditions posed fewer problems for troop movement and provisioning. Control of mountain passes, river valleys, mountain basins, and the few extensive lowlands in the eastern



Fig. 1.1 The Balkan theater of war

Balkans were strategically crucial for both sides in the conflicts, while the rugged, broken terrain restricted the number of set-piece battles fought and imposed specialized training requirements for troops (Fig. 1.1).

To gain a full understanding of the Bulgarian-Byzantine hegemonic wars, knowledge of the belligerents is useful. Simplistically, the

wars pitted “Bulgarians” against “Byzantines.” While this rudimentary description generally is true, it cloaks a complex human reality. Modern notions of such group identities as ethnicity and nationalism cannot be read into depictions of pre-modern times. Some sense of ethnic awareness, based on vernacular language, existed among early medieval populations but it was rudimentary by today’s standards. Personal loyalty to the ruler or state largely was restricted to dominant social elites, with religion inculcating the allegiance of the subject masses.<sup>2</sup> Both protagonists in the wars were of mixed ethnicity, in modern terms, with the “Byzantines” enjoying the edge in group identity and state consciousness—they saw themselves as “Romans (Gr: *Romaioi*)” inhabiting a “Roman” empire. Only after their mass Christian conversion in the late ninth century did the “Bulgarians” begin acquiring a similar sense of identity and state affiliation.

### THE BYZANTINES

An important component of the Roman institutional heritage in Byzantium was the military. Between the disappearance of the classical legionary forces in the late fourth century and the outbreak of the hegemonic wars with Bulgaria in 809, the imperial military underwent significant transformation. Part of that process was evolutionary, such as the shift in primary force makeup from infantry predominance to cavalry in the face of threats from mostly mounted enemies. Expediency in addressing catastrophic military developments during the seventh century, when the empire fought wars on two fronts against the Arabs in West Asia and the Avars-Slavs in the Balkans, also affected military change.<sup>3</sup>

Decisive military defeats by the Arabs and widespread devastation and demographic disruption in the Balkans caused by Avar-Slav incursions and extensive Slavic settlement shattered the empire’s military organization established by emperors Diocletian (284–305) and Constantine I (324–337) in the late third and early fourth centuries that in great part depended on foreign mercenary forces. By the opening of the hegemonic wars, a new military organization, grounded in regionally-based armies predominantly composed of native landed soldier-peasants and few foreign mercenaries, had replaced the old structure. This new organization became known as the “theme system,” which not only represented a basic military arrangement but also evolved into Byzantium’s fundamental provincial administrative structure.<sup>4</sup>



A theme (*thema*; pl.: *themata*) designated a regionally based and recruited military force as well as the territory in which it was stationed. The thematic commander (*strategos*; pl.: *strategoi*) was endowed with military and civil authority, serving as both general and provincial governor. Most subordinate officers and the rank-and-file troopers resided within the theme's territory on land plots intended for their support and designated "military properties," the size and productive value of which varied by rank and troop type.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the hegemonic wars, the number of men serving in a militia-like thematic force varied from as few as 1000 to as many as 18,000, but individual thematic strengths of 2000–4000 men were the norm in the Balkans.<sup>6</sup>

Every theme consisted of one to three military divisions called *tourmai* (sing.: *tourma*), each divided into two to three brigades, or *droungoi* (sing.: *droungos*), which in turn were generally composed of five regiments termed *banda* (sing.: *bandon*). On active service the actual number of units in the tactical subdivisions, as well as troop strengths for all units, varied at the discretion of the commander, either because of the number of troops available for active service or intentional attempts to foil enemy intelligence regarding force size. If an average *bandon* consisted of 200 men, then a *droungos* might contain 1000 men and a *tourma* as many as 2000–3000 men. In the early stages of the hegemonic wars, Byzantium drew on six Balkan thematic armies—Thrace Macedonia, Hellas, Peloponnese Kephalaria and Thessaloniki fielding at most approximately 14,000 men. The number of Balkan themes increased to nine by the final phase of the conflicts in the early eleventh century with the addition of the Strymon and Nikopolis themes, both created from existing themes, and that of Dyrrakhion, increasing the potential field force to perhaps 20,000 men. During the wars the Balkan thematic forces often were augmented by troops from the more numerous and larger Anatolian themes whenever circumstances permitted such transfers.<sup>7</sup>

Themes posed both advantages and disadvantages for Byzantium's government. The recruitment of soldier-peasants holding land within the themes' territories ensured the troopers had vested interests in fighting to protect their loved ones and properties against threats, thus producing highly effective and motivated regional defense forces. In addition, the dual military-civil nature of the themes provided a solid foundation for stable provincial administration. On the other hand, thematic militia-like soldier-peasants often proved reticent to participate in military activities

such as offensive operations outside their home regions, campaigns during crucial phases of the agricultural cycle, and peacetime training.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the regionally powerful military-civil position of thematic *strategoï* made them susceptible to rebellion against the central government, of which there were numerous examples during the period of the hegemonic wars.

In response to the disadvantages posed by the themes, Byzantine emperors, starting with Constantine V (741–775), broke the originally large themes into increasingly smaller ones in efforts to minimize the *strategoï*'s military power. More important, they reestablished a separate professional military force subject to their own authority by transforming five old, essentially ceremonial guard units into combat-ready elite troops, to which a sixth was added at the opening of the hegemonic wars and a seventh in the third quarter of the tenth century. Known collectively as the *tagmata* (sing.: *tagma*), meaning the “regiments,” this elite force consisted of five cavalry units—the Schools (*Skholai*, the senior regiment), the *Exkoubitoi* (the Guards), the *Vigla* (or *Arithmos*—the Watch), the *Hikanatoi* (the Worthies), and the Immortals (*Athanatoi*)—which may each have numbered 4000 men, and two infantry units—the Walls (*Teikhistai*) and the *Noumeroi*—each enrolling 2000 men. All except the *Noumeroi* were garrisoned outside the capital, split between Balkan Thrace and Anatolian Bithynia. These units could be supplemented by about 1000 men of the emperor's bodyguard composed mostly of foreign mercenaries—the *Hetaireia* (Retinue). All told, the imperial professional forces may have contributed as few as 4000 or as many as 24,000 troops.<sup>9</sup>

Thematic armies in the hegemonic wars were 20% cavalry and the rest infantry during the early stages, with the proportion of cavalry increasing to as much as one-third of thematic forces by their close in the early eleventh century.<sup>10</sup> Most troops, both cavalry and infantry, were light or medium (regular) type in terms of armament, given the nature of the rugged Balkan terrain and the Bulgar-Slav enemy forces. Heavy thematic troops, including mounted cataphracts (*kataphraktoi*; *klibanarioi*)—troopers armored from head to foot astride similarly armored horses—and professional theme tagmatic units, made their appearance by the 970s. The five elite *tagmata* were heavy cavalry.<sup>11</sup>

Unlike their opponents in the hegemonic wars, the Byzantine military included a navy. It was organized similar to the land forces in that there existed both thematic and imperial constituents. The three thematic

fleets sported both combat marines and sailors, with the former organized like land troops and the latter under the authority of ship captains. All were commanded by *strategoi*. Two themes in the Balkans—Hellas and Peloponnesemaintained naval squadrons as well as land forces. The thematic fleets screened the empire's eastern Mediterranean coasts against Arab naval attack and played a scant role in the hegemonic wars. The imperial fleet, headquartered in Constantinople, protected the capital and conducted operations in the Black Sea and on the Danube River, seeing significant active service throughout the period of the wars. Because this fleet was crucial for the defense of the capital and supporting military operations in the eastern Balkans, its admiral (*droungarios*) enjoyed a higher status than the thematic naval *strategoi*.<sup>12</sup>

During the hegemonic wars, the imperial fleet enrolled some 4000 marines and 19,600 oarsmen.<sup>13</sup> These served on a variety of ships. A warship (*dromon*—"runner") could range from a large vessel with 200 oarsmen and 70 marines to smaller ones with total contingents of 108–110 men each. The fleet usually comprised between 150 and 175 ships. There also were smaller pilot and support vessels as well as transport barges, many of which were requisitioned from merchant fleets as needed. The imperial fleet made its major contribution in the wars through its transport capabilities, either moving and landing forces along the Black Sea coast and the banks of the Danube or ferrying steppe allies across the Danube in strategic operations against Bulgaria. The fleet's existence at Constantinople, which guaranteed uninterrupted supply of the capital, thwarted all Bulgarian plans to take the city by siege while it, in turn, could invest enemy strong points along the Danube's banks or the Black Sea coast.<sup>14</sup>

An advantage enjoyed by Byzantium over its enemies in the hegemonic wars was an intellectually sophisticated approach toward the military arts among its commanders. Emperors such as Maurice (582–602), Leo VI (886–912), and Nikephoros II Phokas (963–969) wrote, or had written for them, in-depth works of strategy and tactics, in which detailed attention was paid to such matters as troop types, formations, integrated force coordination, armament, order of march, logistics, encampments, discipline, training, security, and intelligence. Beyond strictly immediate campaign necessities, intelligence information often included extensive analyses of potential enemies' general strengths and weaknesses for the purpose of extracting maximum strategic and tactical profit in any conflicts with them.<sup>15</sup> Despite the benefits enjoyed by the Byzantines,

military success in the wars often boiled down to the personal abilities of individual field commanders. No amount of organization or access to theoretical resources could compensate for untalented, incompetent, or uninspiring commanders, a reality frequently exposed during the period of the hegemonic wars, especially in its first half.<sup>16</sup>

## THE BULGARIANS

At the start of the hegemonic wars in the early ninth century, “Bulgarians” as a unique group of people did not yet exist, and neither did a unified state of “Bulgaria.” What did exist was a political entity dominated by a formerly semi-nomadic, Hunno-Turkic people—the Bulgars—who had established themselves astride the Danube River in the Balkans’ northeastern corner between 679 and 681. Within the borders of the lands controlled by the Bulgar ruler (*han*), there lived a population mostly comprised of Bulgars, a small but dominant minority, and Slavs, the subordinate but undoubted majority. Holding separate pagan religious beliefs, speaking separate languages, and embracing different mores and attire, the two communities initially shared little in common other than obedience to the same *han* and a perception of Byzantium as a threat to their continued independent existences. These two commonalities, combined with the forces of normal human sexual attraction, were strong enough to spark a gradual integrative process that progressed slowly throughout the eighth century and was advancing, but still incomplete, by the opening of the ninth.<sup>17</sup>

The decisive step in the integration process that merged Bulgars and Slavs into “Bulgarians” occurred in the mid-ninth century with the conversion of the Bulgar state’s population to Orthodox Christianity and the creation of the Cyrillic Slavic literary and administrative language, which guaranteed that embracing Orthodoxy did not entail Byzantine subjugation. Any remaining Bulgar-Slav segregation thereafter rapidly disappeared. Christianity swept away the differing pagan beliefs of both peoples, and Orthodoxy’s widespread propagation in Slavic guise fashioned a common religion and language, ultimately creating a single people and culture—the Bulgarian.<sup>18</sup>

Orthodox Christian conversion and the creation of Cyrillic Slavic entailed political ramifications. Just as Orthodoxy, the emperor, and the imperial state were inextricably joined in the minds of the Byzantines as crucial components of God’s divine earthly plan, a similar concept

infiltrated among the emerging Christian Bulgarians. If the Christian Byzantine emperors could be proclaimed God's viceroy on earth, so too could a Christian Bulgarian ruler claim similar status. By the opening of the hegemonic wars' middle phase at the end of the ninth century, the Bulgarian ruler was a divinely-ordained monarch reigning over a culturally unified state with a loyal population and endowed with the adopted trappings of an Orthodox Christian autocrat, based on the only available model—the Orthodox Byzantine emperor. Borrowing the imperial raiment included borrowing the imperial ideology, resulting in a new, more intense level of combativeness in the hegemonic struggle for the Balkans. From the end of the ninth through the early eleventh centuries, the conflicts acquired the aura of struggles for imperial precedence within the Orthodox Christian world.<sup>19</sup>

The Bulgarians emerging by the early tenth century were an ethno-cultural alloy of mostly Slavs and Bulgars, with the Slavic component decidedly predominant. The Bulgar contribution to the mix, however, was not insignificant. Although little in terms of their language and mores survived the merger with the Slavs, the Bulgars made a lasting contribution to the Bulgarian ethno-cultural alloy in the areas of administrative leadership and the military arts. The armies fielded by Bulgaria throughout the hegemonic wars reflected Bulgar more than Slavic military structures.

### *The Bulgars*

The Bulgars emerged from the welter of nomadic Hunnic and Turkic tribal confederations that ebbed and flowed throughout Western Asia and the southwestern steppes during the fifth and sixth centuries. They held their origins to lay in the fifth-century Hunnic confederation and considered Attila (434–453) their first ruler.<sup>20</sup> After the fragmentation of the Hunnic coalition upon Attila's death, the tribes that eventually coalesced into the Bulgars retreated eastward onto the southern steppes north of the Black and Azov seas. By the end of the sixth century the assorted Bulgar tribes were swept into new foreign tribal confederations, with the westernmost brought within the Avar *kaganate* (the state ruled by the Avar *kagan* [ruling prince]), centered on Pannonia, and the eastern tribes falling under Western (Gök) Turk overlordship. These matters stood until a revolt against the Western Turks in the 630s, led by the Onogur tribal chief Kubrat (or Kurt), resulted in the creation of a steppe state known to the Byzantines as "Great Bulgaria."<sup>21</sup>

Kubrat's state was wooed by Byzantine Emperor Herakleios (610–641) as an ally against the rising Khazar confederation situated to Great Bulgaria's east. A treaty was signed and Kubrat granted gifts and the Byzantine title of patrician (*patrikios*).<sup>22</sup> Great Bulgaria did not long outlive the death of its creator (between 663 and 668), disintegrating under Khazar pressure. Kubrat's sons scattered mostly westward, taking varying numbers of tribal followers with them. Two of the brothers—Kuber and Asparuh—ultimately established themselves in the Balkans at Byzantine expense by the 680s. Asparuh's following constituted the main branch of the Onogur Bulgar diaspora. Their conquest of Byzantium's northeastern Balkan territories (Dobruzdha and the Danubian Plain) signaled the beginning of a permanent and incrementally expanding Bulgar state.<sup>23</sup>

Unlike previous Hunno-Turkic political entities, which were tribal confederations, Asparuh's Danubian Bulgar state was a centralized monarchy from its inception. As head of the recognized dynastic clan (the Dulo [clan of the "War Horses"]), the *han* reigned as hereditary head of state, supreme military commander, and probably high priest of the Bulgar god, Tangra (Almighty Sky-God). He exerted authority through a nobility divided in status between "inner" and "outer" members. The "inner" nobles were leading clan elders (*boili*; sing.: *boil[a]*; later *bolyari*; sing.: *bolyar*), a small number of whom acted as the *han*'s governing-advisory council while the rest functioned as government officials. The more numerous "outer" nobles (*bagaini*; sing.: *bagain*), comprised of full-time mounted warriors, served as provincial officers. Because Bulgar society embraced a warrior culture, governing duties entailed military responsibilities. The *han* was supreme commander. The senior official of the governing council—the *kavhan*—ranked second-in-command, acted as chancellor, and served as army commander whenever the *han* did not take the field. There were a number of titled officers whose military-administrative functions are not clearly discernable, given the paucity of source information, although the title *tarhan* was a military one, perhaps analogous to that of *strategos*.<sup>24</sup>

There is little specific data concerning the structure of the Bulgarian army during the hegemonic wars.<sup>25</sup> Since the Bulgars originally were steppe people, it can be assumed they contributed most of the cavalry arm to the military while the subjugated Slavs generally furnished infantry. Although initially comprised of all armed, able-bodied men fighting as light cavalry and organized along clan lines, by the opening of the hegemonic wars Bulgar cavalry entered the field as medium or heavy

troops consisting of full-time warriors organized within a decimal system for regimental-like units (900–1000 men each). This core mounted force probably averaged between 10,000 and 15,000 men on a standing basis.<sup>26</sup> In traditional Turkic fashion, the entire army (*sarak*) was divided into left and right wings, determined by the home regions of the various units relative to the *han's* capital (Pliska or Preslav). Similar to the Byzantine system, this regular force was bolstered by elite standing troops maintained at the *han's* expense, which constituted both his personal retinue and a pool of officers for other units.<sup>27</sup>

In times of extensive military operations, the relatively small full-time Bulgar army was augmented by general levies of peasants and freeholders. These conscripted troops apparently were armed by the *han's* government and remunerated by sharing in whatever booty was acquired during a campaign. No sources describe any system of military landholding to support such a militia force or the much fewer full-time troops. Although this expanded army could not be maintained at full force levels for lengthy stretches of time and generally lacked the training and equipment to fight successful set-piece battles on open ground with the more professional Byzantines, it was far from being a rabble led by a small group of diehard warriors. Discipline was strict and great care was taken to ensure that all weapons and armament were in effective order.<sup>28</sup>

### *The Slavs*

Originally a numerous subject population of Asparuh's late seventh-century Bulgar conquerors, the Slavs of the eastern and central Balkans evolved into the ethnic essence of the "Bulgarians" by the close of the hegemonic wars. Superiority in numbers, the forces of human attraction, a commonality of interests on the part of social leaderships, mass conversion to Orthodox Christianity, and the embedding of Cyrillic Slavic as the state's common liturgical-literary-administrative language contributed to that evolutionary process, which concluded with the assimilation of the Turkic Bulgars by their Slavic subjects and the formation of a Slavic Bulgarian people and the state of Bulgaria.

The origins of the Slavs is wrapped in controversy. Prior to the 1990s Slavic origins were explained in terms of a migratory expansion of tribal groups during the fifth and sixth centuries from an original Slavic homeland variously thought located somewhere on the plains of eastern Poland, Ukraine, or Belarus. Since the 1990s an alternative theory has

emerged disputing the migratory approach and substituting in its place the spread of “Slavdom” through a process of cultural accretion among widespread, ethnically indeterminate groups of people. According to this hypothesis, the process began in the sixth century among communities located on the Wallachian Plain whose continuous direct contact with the East Roman empire first shaped among them the cultural traits identified as Slavic. Those attributes then spread to other groups lying to their north and northeast.<sup>29</sup>

No matter which theory of origins is embraced, primitive communities first identified as “Slavs” (Gr: *Sklavanoi*) by the East Romans appeared as raiders into imperial Balkan territories during the early sixth century from settlements on the Wallachian Plain, north of the empire’s Danubian border. It is thought that they were loosely divided between two separate but related groupings—Antes and Slaveni—but that these displayed no sophisticated political organization.<sup>30</sup> Although they conducted destructive raids into the empire, the Slavs remained disunited, posing more of a nuisance than a major threat until they fell under the control of the Avar *kaganate* in the late 560s. During the rest of the sixth and first two decades of the seventh centuries, those Slavs who had not fled southward into imperial lands as refugees joined the Avars in continuously raiding throughout the Balkans. Subjected to sophisticated Avar central administration and confronted by the highly developed East Roman/Byzantine defenses, the Avars’ Slavic allies experienced socio-political development elevating them to a more complex level of group social existence and cemented their ethnic self identity.<sup>31</sup>

In the early 580s Avar-Slav forces captured the imperial fortress of Srem (m: Sremska Mitrovica) on the Sava River, thus turning the empire’s defenses along the Danube. Throughout the rest of the decade, Avar-Slav warriors cut swaths of destruction deep into the Balkans, ravaging Thrace and the environs of Constantinople. Fortunately for the empire, its major Balkan urban centers withstood the assaults and, so long as these held out, the imperial authorities did not view the Avar-Slav menace as potentially fatal. What they found troubling, however, was the large number of the formerly disorganized and materially primitive Slavic intruders who sought new lands to settle as much as simple plunder.

The Slavs’ disunity and lack of state structures posed difficulties for the empire in treating them in traditional diplomatic or military fashion, and their primitive level of development permitted them to inhabit environments that more sophisticated populations avoided. Byzantium



could not concentrate sizeable military forces to root them out because of Persian and Arab threats in West Asia. Following the ebb and rapid decline of the Avar *kaganate* after a failed assault on Constantinople in 626, the Balkan Slavs threw off Avar suzerainty. At that time their settlements were spread extensively throughout the Balkans' interior and the territories in their hands were beyond the imperial government's authority.<sup>32</sup> Slavic settlement in the Balkans was aided by domestic developments in the region. Urban life had contracted and large swaths of rural land had become depopulated because of the devastating effects of the bubonic plague that ravaged the empire in the 540s and the empire-wide economic disruption that accompanied the loss of West Asian and African territories to the Arabs in the seventh century.<sup>33</sup>

Settled Slavic Balkan communities became grouped along tribal lines, with the leaders of each grouping exerting local control over followers inhabiting specific territories. Although some of these communities—in Thrace, Western Thrace, Thessaly, and much of the Peloponnese—were brought under Byzantine authority by the early ninth century, the majority remained beyond imperial control, existing as single-or multi-tribal territorial entities called *Sklaviniai* (sing.: *Sklavinia*) by the Byzantines. At the same time, newcomers to the Balkans were making efforts to win mastery over various of these Slavic communities. In the Balkans' northwest during the seventh century, Croat and Serb invaders, two related but separate people of mixed Iranian/Sarmatian-Slav ancestry, established control over local Slaveni Slav settlements and formed two loosely structured tribal confederations. Both of these intruders swiftly lost their Iranian/Sarmatian ethnic characteristics and underwent assimilation into the Slavic culture of their more numerous subjects.<sup>34</sup> The Antes Slavic tribes in the Balkans' northeast were subjugated by Asparuh's Bulgars in the 680s, after which the *Sklaviniai* located in the central and southcentral Balkans became targets for Bulgar state expansion by the opening of the ninth century. Since Byzantine Balkan policy sought to reassert control over all lost former territories and their inhabitants, competition between Byzantium and Bulgaria for suzerainty over the *Sklaviniai* helped fuel the outbreak and continuation of the hegemonic wars.<sup>35</sup>

Little is known about early Slavic social-political organization in the Balkans prior to the emergence of Slavic states in the ninth and tenth centuries. Apparently, the continuous interaction of Slavic primitive war bands, led by prestigious and renowned warriors, with sophisticated East Roman forces during the sixth century led to an amalgamation of those

bands into larger, more socially stratified, multi-clan tribal entities commanded by chieftains. Unlike the former warrior leaders, these chiefs enjoyed institutionalized authority over respective tribal groups and the territories they inhabited. This process of tribal consolidation was furthered by Avar suzerainty over most of them during the late sixth and early seventh centuries, and in some cases during that time the process of Slavic social-political development reached a higher stage of multi-tribe organization led by an emerging elite of associated warriors and notables (*zhupani*; sing.: *zhupan*).<sup>36</sup> Although much has been made of a statement by Prokopios in his *Wars* that the sixth-century Slavs lived “under a democracy,” the term as he knew it had nothing to do with the modern political concept. Instead, it meant that the Slavs possessed no central, institutionalized rulers or ruling elites.<sup>37</sup>

As *Sklaviniai* were brought under Bulgar authority during the late seventh and eighth centuries, the consolidation of leadership among the Slavic entities progressed. While matters of military concern, security, and tribute payments were overseen by Bulgar *boili*, mundane affairs within the Bulgar state’s *Sklaviniai* were handled by Slavic *zhupani* and village elders, thus demonstrating a dual administrative structure in which the emerging Slavic leadership initially played an independent role.<sup>38</sup> The hegemonic wars witnessed the progressive dismantling of such dual administration as, first, the Bulgar *hans*, starting with Krum (803–814), imposed their own chosen officials (some of whom were Slavic *zhupani*) on the *Sklaviniai* under their authority, transforming the semiautonomous territories of Slavic settlement into centrally controlled provinces. Second, the process of the Bulgars’ cultural assimilation by the Slavs progressively merged their leaderships into a single ruling class and eliminated the underlying reason for dual administration. Last, mass conversion to Orthodox Christianity in Slavic form during the late ninth and early tenth centuries eradicated further need for separate political-administrative leadership in the Bulgarian state.<sup>39</sup>

Little specific is known about the Slavs’ contribution to Bulgarian combat forces during the hegemonic wars. East Roman descriptions of the Slavic military from the early sixth and early seventh centuries paint a picture of a primitive, almost anarchistic force of light infantry sporting little or no armor and incapable of withstanding the East Romans in set-piece battles. Each tribe or tribal grouping fielded its own force comprised of all its able-bodied men. Although they were untrained in a sophisticated tactical sense, their physical toughness, skill with arms, and

use of difficult terrain to their advantage instilled respect in their imperial opponents.<sup>40</sup>

Slavic unit organization and size during the hegemonic wars remain matters of conjecture. Byzantine sources recorded that the Slavs often fielded tribal forces consisting of between 1200 and 3000 men.<sup>41</sup> These were comprised of numerous war bands, numbering roughly 200 warriors each and representing the able-bodied men of a single large village or a group of neighboring small ones. The bands were led by local notables who accepted the overall command of some more widely renowned warrior. Originally, such agglomerations of war bands were circumstantial and temporary but, by the outbreak of the hegemonic wars, Slavic leadership within the Bulgar state had coalesced into a system of institutionalized chiefs (*zhupani*) and notables (*bolyari*) whose individual personal retinues and war-band followers were integrated into the decimal unit structure of the Bulgar military organization.<sup>42</sup>

Slavs have commonly been depicted as providing the infantry component in the early medieval armies fielded by their Avar and Bulgar overlords. While broadly accurate, such a characterization obscures the fact that Slavs also contributed cavalry or, at the very least, mounted infantry. Since both the Avars and Bulgars fielded highly mobile mounted forces, it did not take their Slavic tributaries long to appreciate such service. The breadth and depth of rapid Avar-Slav military operations in the Balkans during the late sixth and early seventh centuries would indicate that all the intruders were mounted, whether they actually fought that way or not. Sources from the period refer to named Slavic leaders being mounted or having mounted retinues. By the opening of the hegemonic wars, the Bulgar *han's* Slavic subjects not only furnished light infantry to his military but light cavalry troops as well, while Slavic leaders (*zhupani* and *bolyari*) and their retinues were armed similar to their Bulgar counterparts. With the assimilation of the Bulgar by the Slavic element in the state, Slavs thereafter conducted all the military functions formerly performed by Bulgars within the Bulgar military structure that they retained.<sup>43</sup>

## ALLIES

Both Bulgaria and Byzantium enlisted allies at various times during the hegemonic conflicts. Significant of these were two semi-nomadic peoples—the Magyars and Pechenegs—who in succession prowled

the steppes to the northeast of Bulgaria, making them natural allies for the Byzantines. Despite this Byzantine advantage, the Bulgarians at times won the Pechenegs to their side for brief but crucial periods. Also important for the Byzantines were two Slavic peoples—the Serbs and the Croats—who lay to Bulgaria’s west and northwest. Similar to the Magyars and Pechenegs, these Slavs’ geographic location relative to Bulgaria rendered them militarily important enough for the Byzantines to court them as allies and for the Bulgarians to counter their threat through military action. Finally, there were the Kievan Rus’, located to the north of both the Bulgarians and Pechenegs, who first became involved in the wars as Byzantine allies during the mid-tenth century but, after defeating the Bulgarians, wound up allied with them against the Byzantines. Their subsequent defeat in the early 970s had lasting negative implications for Bulgaria in the final phase of the wars.

### *The Magyars and the Pechenegs*

Both the Magyars and the Pechenegs emerged from the human cauldron that was the steppes north of the Caucasus and Black Sea during late antique and early medieval times. Both fell under the control or influence of the Khazar state that emerged on the Eurasian steppes in the seventh century.

Among the Khazars’ subjects were seven tribes that eventually constituted the Magyars. Their Neolithic ancestors originated in the Kama River region of Central Asia, adjacent to the Ural Mountains, and spoke a Finno-Ugric language unrelated to any other. These people’s descendants migrated southwestward onto the steppes, where they came into contact with the Iranian Alans and Sarmatians and with Skythian peoples, who exerted powerful formative influences on them, especially regarding horse culture. Following the collapse of Attila’s Hunnic confederation, the Magyars living on the steppes north of the Sea of Azov were submerged in the loose tribal confederations created in the sixth century by Bulgar peoples who had fled eastward from Pannonia and settled in the region. The Magyars suffered the same fate as the Bulgars in being incorporated into the Western Turk state by the late sixth century. Domination by Bulgar-Turk societies stamped Turkish cultural characteristics on the non-Turkic Magyars, particularly in personal and tribal names. By the mid-seventh century the Magyars were members of Kubrat’s Onogur Bulgar group and his state of Great Bulgaria, from

which association they acquired the root for the name that most foreigners later used in referring to them—Hungarians.<sup>44</sup>

Following Great Bulgaria's collapse, the seven Magyar tribes became tributaries of the Khazars, from whom they acquired the tradition of dual political rulers: A sacred, figurehead chief (*kende*, or *kündü*) and a vice-chief (*gyula*), who was military commander and de facto leader. The *gyula* was seconded by an officer entitled *horka* (or *karchas*). The Magyars broke with the Khazars sometime in the early ninth century and established an independent tribal federation on the southern steppes north of the Sea of Azov, a region called Levadia by the Byzantines. They were joined by three breakaway Turkish Khazar tribes, the Kabars, who served as important military auxiliaries in the Magyars' main mounted force, always positioned in the forefront during combat because of their recognized warrior ethos.<sup>45</sup> Beyond this fact, little is known about early Magyar military organization. One can assume that, like most other steppe peoples, they fielded light and medium cavalry composed of all able-bodied armed men from the federation's tribes, led by their tribal chiefs and formed into decimal-based sized units. These tribal units may have been structured along clan lines, with each under the authority of its respective clan leader. The *gyula* served as the overall force commander and led an elite retinue, as did each of his tribal chiefs. At the time of their participation in the hegemonic wars, the total Magyar military may have numbered some 20,000 warriors.<sup>46</sup>

Sometime in the mid-ninth century the Magyars moved westward from Levadia to the steppe region lying between the Dnieper River and the mouth of the Danube that they called Etelköz (or Atalkuzu), encompassing Bessarabia (m: Moldova). This action may have been forced on them by another steppe people pressing from the east—the Pechenegs.<sup>47</sup>

Pecheneg origins lay in the heart of Central Asia, east of the Aral Sea. At first a loose nomadic Turkic grouping, the Pechenegs were brought within a large tribal conglomerate governed by the Western Turks, who constituted half of a large Turkic empire stretching from Mongolia to the borders of Sassanid Persia by the early seventh century. In the 550s that vast empire broke into western and eastern halves, with the former controlling much of Central Asia and the latter holding Mongolia and a large portion of northern China. By the middle of the seventh century China destroyed the Eastern Turkic state while the western one dissolved into intertribal warfare.<sup>48</sup>

In the chaos of the Western Turks' internecine wars, the eight Pecheneg tribes were driven westward past the Aral Sea by the Karluk

Turks, until they arrived on the steppes between the Ural and Volga rivers north of the Caspian Sea. By the late eighth century they were in contact with the highly developed and culturally refined Khazars, who viewed the Pechenegs as a barbarian threat. To deal with the menace, the Khazars allied with the Oğuzes, a Turkic people lying to the Pechenegs' east, attacked, and defeated the Pechenegs sometime between 830 and 860. The victory pushed the Pechenegs farther westward into Levidia, where they, in turn, displaced the resident Magyar allies of the Khazars. They remained in their newly won lands until circumstances arising out of the Bulgarian-Byzantine hegemonic wars opened further opportunities for territorial expansion. In 895, while serving as Bulgarian allies, they again defeated and displaced the Magyars. Occupying Etekköz placed the Pechenegs directly north of the Danube, rendering them strategically important for both Bulgaria and Byzantium.<sup>49</sup>

Regarding political-military organization, even less is known about the Pechenegs' than of the Magyars' at that time. There were eight Pecheneg tribes that contributed able-bodied, armed light (and perhaps medium) cavalymen to the military force, with each tribe led by a warrior chief who was distinguished by having a colored horsetail banner.<sup>50</sup> The tribes, three of which were considered senior and called the Kangars, were divided into 40 subunits, perhaps clans, which also had recognized leaders.<sup>51</sup> Presumably the Pechenegs followed steppe tradition regarding military organization, with units structured on the decimal system and organized along tribal groupings under the authority of tribal chiefs, each tribal division comprised of pan-clan subunits. The recognized supreme ruler (*khan*) served as commander-in-chief. All of the leaders, from tribal level to *khan*, fielded elite units of armed retainers. Total force size of the Pecheneg military during the late ninth and early tenth centuries, when their real or threatened intervention in the hegemonic wars was significant, is unknown, but their army probably numbered more than 20,000 warriors, given their two consecutive defeats of the Magyars who fielded that number of horsemen.

### *The Croats and the Serbs*

The Croats and the Serbs were two separate tribes of mixed Iranian/Sarmatian-Slav ethnicity who entered the northwestern Balkans in the early seventh century, ejected any Avars living there, and brought the settled Slaveni Slavic communities in those areas under their authority.

Over time, the new conquerors suffered a fate similar to the Bulgars in that they both were culturally assimilated into their Slavic subject populations by the opening of the ninth century. Although both managed to create some sort of tribal associations under their respective control, these initially were politically loose and unstable. Facing continuous, direct pressures from societies more socio-politically advanced than themselves—the Franks of Charlemagne (768–814) and the Bulgarians for the Croats, and the Bulgarians and the Byzantines for the Serbs—the two were progressing toward political and state consolidation when the hegemonic wars erupted.

During the 790s forces of Frank King Charlemagne attacked and defeated the Avar *kaganate*, winning the Franks control of western Pannonia, northern Dalmatia, and Slavonia, which mainly were inhabited by Croats. During the ninth century two fluid Croat states in southwestern Pannonia (Slavonia) and northern Dalmatia arose out of what originally had been eleven tribes, whose rulers were Frank tributaries. Although Byzantium reestablished an active presence in the Dalmatian coastal cities during that period, Frank suzerainty over Croats inhabiting Dalmatia's hinterlands, as well as those living in Slavonia, led to the Croats' conversion to Roman Catholicism and their acquiring a Western cultural and political orientation.

A Dalmatian Croat rebellion in 875 ended Frank suzerainty and an independent state was created, although the Franks retained control of Pannonian Croatia for a while longer. The princely throne of the new state proved unstable, with occupants following one another in rapid succession, until Tomislav (910–928), an ally of Byzantium, gained the throne of Dalmatian Croatia. He consolidated his authority, liberated Pannonian Croatia from depredations inflicted by the Magyars, and incorporated it under his rule, creating the first united Croat state, which probably included Dalmatia, Croatia Proper, western Slavonia, and the greater part of Bosnia. In the early 920s Tomislav concluded an alliance with Byzantium against Bulgaria that sparked a Bulgarian invasion of his state, but the Bulgarians suffered a resounding defeat. With Tomislav's death in 928, united Croatia disintegrated into civil war. Croatia's internal political weakness during the rest of the tenth and early eleventh century, coupled with Byzantium's inability to stabilize the situation, led to Venice's intervention in the region and its insinuation into Croatian affairs. A game of competing nominal suzerainty over Dalmatian coastal cities ensued between Venice and Croatia, dying down only in 1019,

when Byzantium reclaimed all imperial Dalmatia following Bulgaria's final defeat in the wars, and Croatia became a Byzantine vassal.<sup>52</sup>

Turning to the Serbs, their original incursion into the Balkans resulted in their establishing themselves as the ruling elite in a number of *Sklaviniai* (which the Serbs called *županije*) located throughout the northwestern Balkans south of the Croats. Although there were inter-relationships among the various rulers (*župani*; sing.: *župan*) and elites of those communities, there exists no evidence for serious state consolidation until after the opening stages of the hegemonic wars, when the Serbs of Raška were threatened by Bulgar expansionary efforts in their direction. The Bulgar threat, coupled with Byzantine attempts to stabilize organized Serbian anti-Bulgar resistance through large monetary inducements, encouraged some of the *županije* to unite under the leadership of one Vlastimir, who took the title of prince (*knez*) and withstood a Bulgar invasion of his territories sometime between 839 and 850. Despite Serbia's division following Vlastimir's death, the Serbs defeated a second Bulgar invasion in the mid-850s, but their inability to unite under a stable ruler transformed them into pawns of both the Byzantines and Bulgarians, who enthroned and dethroned each others' puppet rulers throughout the rest of the ninth and early decades of the tenth centuries as part of the diplomacy tied to the middle phase of the hegemonic wars. In the 920s the Serbs were conquered by the Bulgarians. Although they soon won their freedom from Bulgarian rule, the Serbs played a marginal role in the later wars and rapidly fell under Byzantine vassalage.<sup>53</sup>

The organization of the Croatian and Serbian militaries resembled that of the Bulgarian Slavs, although the titles of officers in some cases were different. One might assume that the Croats' military exhibited some Frank influences, given their lengthy association with the eastern Franks.

### *The Kievan Rus'*

The origins of the Kievan Rus' is one of the most heatedly argued topics in Russian historiography. At issue is the extent to which the earliest Russian state was the product of either invading Swedish Vikings (later called Varangians [*Varangoi*] by the Byzantines) or the efforts of Slavic tribes inhabiting the forested regions north of the steppes. The pro-Viking perspective, termed the "Normanist Theory," credits them



with founding the first Russian state in the far north around Novgorod in the early ninth century and then expanding its borders to the south and Kiev, in the process of which they created and dominated the state's ruling elite. The pro-Slav perspective—the “Anti-Normanist Theory”—claims that the East Slavic inhabitants of the Novgorodian and Kievan regions were well on their way toward political consolidation by the time the Vikings arrived, and that those intruders simply became players in domestic developments as part of native Slavic leaders' mercenary retinues (*druzhini*). Feeding the controversy is the fact that written primary evidence for the formative process is limited, the most extensive source available being the *Russian Primary Chronicle*, which is semi-legendary, compiled some two centuries after the fact, and probably had its own contemporary political agenda to support regarding state centralization. Even so, the Scandinavian names of early individuals mentioned in the chronicle, combined with similar notices in extant Byzantine sources, has led most scholars to accept that the Vikings played leading political, military, and economic roles in shaping the ninth-century Kievan state even if there were preexisting Slavic political entities.<sup>54</sup>

That Vikings were present in the Finn-and Slav-inhabited north was the result of their insatiable economic ambitions. They strove to tap directly into the lucrative trade markets of Byzantium and the Islamic *khalifate* by pushing southward from the far north along the Dnieper and Volga rivers toward the wealth concentrated in those civilized societies lying south of the Black and Caspian seas. It is difficult to separate economic from military activity during the early medieval period. While securing their commercial routes to the south in the early and mid-ninth century, the Vikings gained control over the Slavic state at Kiev, located on the Dnieper above the northern edge of the open steppes, replacing the Khazars as the recipients of the tribute paid by local Slavs.

From their Dnieper base, the Viking Rus' organized a series of assaults on Constantinople (860, 907, and 941) with forces drawn from their own numbers, subject or allied Slavs, and other mercenaries, who were transported down the Dnieper and across the Black Sea on hundreds of small-or medium-sized ships. Although they wreaked widespread devastation on the Byzantine capital's environs and sparked dread among the empire's population, they failed to capture the city. Nevertheless, the Byzantines felt compelled to buy them off with treaties (907, 911, and 945) granting the Rus' (or Ros, to the Byzantines) commercial concessions within the empire. For the Rus', such results probably were the

goals of their attacks while, for Byzantium, the treaties established diplomatic relations with those warriors from the strategically important north. The organized savagery of the Rus' attacks made enlisting them as mercenaries attractive to Byzantium's military authorities, and Rus' contingents participated in Byzantine expeditions against Crete and Italy during the tenth century. By the beginning of the next, Rus' mercenary units were common components of all Byzantine military forces.<sup>55</sup>

With growing diplomatic relations came Byzantine missionary efforts to convert the Rus' to Orthodox Christianity, thereby drawing them more deeply into Byzantium's cultural-political orbit. Although the widow of Kievan Prince Igor (912–945), Princess Olga (945–968), converted, the new religion initially failed to take root and her son and successor, Svyatoslav, remained a staunch pagan. By her time, however, the ethnic assimilation of the Scandinavian Rus' minority by the Slavic majority population was well underway—Olga's son, and all succeeding Kievan princes, bore Slavic names. As in Bulgaria, Christian conversion in Slavic form (borrowed from Bulgaria) sped the completion of the ethno-cultural assimilatory process leading to the creation of "Russians." Circumstances rooted in the Balkan hegemonic wars ultimately brought about that final development.

Svyatoslav was courted as an ally by Byzantine Emperor Nikephoros II Phokas (963–969) to attack the Bulgarians from the north in the late 960s, creating the conditions that sparked the final phase of the hegemonic wars. Later, during those last Balkan conflicts, Svyatoslav's successor, Vladimir I the Saint (980–1015), provided important military assistance to Emperor Basil II in the guise of 6000 Rus' mercenaries, who became known in Byzantium as the Varangian Guard. As part of that deal in 988, Vladimir requested Basil's sister Anna as his wife, but the marriage required that he convert to Orthodox Christianity. To avoid becoming a Byzantine dependent, he did so on his own terms by attacking and capturing Byzantine Kherson (m: Kerch) in the Crimea. Vladimir then was baptized and literally forced his subjects to follow his lead. Later he built a large cathedral in Kiev for his new wife that was furnished with items looted from churches in Kherson. Thus the Russians became Orthodox Christians and Vladimir earned the posthumous sobriquet of "Saint."<sup>56</sup>

The forces fielded by the Rus' in the Balkans during their 960s and 970s interventions against Bulgaria are considered the last retaining significant traces of Viking organization. When they first appeared in the

far north during the early ninth century, the Vikings were armed infantry transported by boats along the many rivers cutting paths through the dense northern forests. Each boat held on average 40–60 men who served as crew while aboard and infantry when disembarked. Slav-built, single-tree dugout boats (Gr: *monoxyla*), holding from 40 to 50 men, frequently were used for river traffic of all kinds. A boat's crew constituted the smallest distinct military unit and its ranks were filled by either the retinue of a local leader or a levy of able-bodied freemen. During the early stages of their presence in Russia, the Vikings exhibited little centralized military organization and appeared to conduct operations in an almost anarchistic fashion, motivated more by a collective sense of greed than anything else.<sup>57</sup>

Although their political leader originally used the Scandinavian title of *jarl*, once the Vikings settled permanently in the Kievan region close to the steppes, he acquired the Khazar-derived princely title of *chaganus*, which later changed to *knez* as the Slavicization of the Vikings grew complete. He commanded a mercenary retinue (*hirð*, later *druzhdina*) initially comprised of dependent fellow Vikings complemented by Slavs and foreigners (Khazars and Pechenegs), who constituted the standing military force and the leader's administrative officers. His second-in-command maintained a retinue of his own, as probably did other top commanders within the leader's *druzhdina*. Originally small in number (perhaps 400 men), as the *chaganus* solidified his state authority and his territories and subject population expanded, the character of his *druzhdina* changed from a predominantly Viking to a mostly Slavic standing military, and its numbers may have grown into the thousands (perhaps 12,000–20,000 men) by the time the Rus' invaded Bulgaria in the late 960s. In periods of emergency this elite standing force was augmented by a general levy of rural and urban freemen organized into units by village or town, but these levies were ill armed, undisciplined, and of limited military value other than "arrow fodder." The Rus' eventually embraced the Slav-based decimal system of unit organization but little specific evidence exists regarding it until after the period of our study.<sup>58</sup>

While close proximity to and endemic warfare with mounted steppe peoples probably led the Rus' and their Slavic subjects to adapt to mounted warfare, the Rus' forces that intervened in the Balkans consisted of infantry transported by ships to the mouth of the Danube. According to Byzantine accounts, their cavalry was comprised of allied Bulgarian and hired Magyar and Pecheneg mercenaries, all of whom

deserted the Rus' infantry force by the closing stages of the campaign. In the final pitched battles with the Byzantines, the Rus' were portrayed as fighting savagely and effectively on foot, while their lone attempt at mounted combat exposed an amateurishness that placed them at a distinct disadvantage.<sup>59</sup>

## ARMAMENT, FORTIFICATIONS, AND TACTICS

The Byzantine military was the best trained, most highly organized, and well-equipped force fielded by any of the belligerents during the hegemonic wars. Its combat performance varied, however, from poor to excellent over the course of those conflicts depending on the quality of its leadership, its overall morale, the nature of the terrain over which it operated, the capabilities of its foes, and the mix of its units relative to tactical circumstances faced at any given time. Intangibles that had little to do with armament and tactics could trump seeming advantages and often proved decisive on a battlefield or in a campaign. The same can be said for the Bulgarian forces. Since all belligerents employed relatively similar force types (cavalry and infantry), armament, and basic tactics, it is the intangibles that make the historical narrative of the wars so interesting. Nevertheless, a brief overview of the armament and tactics employed is in order.

### *Armament*

Armament—body armor and weapons—was the second most fundamental factor, after mode of mobility, in determining the functional classification of troops in the belligerents' armies. First, troops were either cavalry or infantry and, second, they were either light, medium (regular), or heavy. This second category was determined by the amount of body armor worn and the weapons employed. Byzantium was the only belligerent that consistently fielded armies with a mix of all troop categories, although Bulgaria managed that feat at times. The steppe allied forces were almost exclusively light or medium cavalry, while the Balkan Slavic forces may have included cavalry but were mostly light to medium infantry.<sup>60</sup>

Light troops were weighted down with little or no body armor or helmets, making them ideal for conducting military operations in the mountainous, wooded, and broken terrain of the Balkans. Battle

clothing for light troops consisted mostly of linen, woolen, or leather tunics and trousers, with leather boots. Fur, leather, or felt caps also were worn, and in cold seasons woolen or fur tunics and cloaks were substituted for linen garments. Byzantine regulations for light troops mentioned them carrying a small target-shaped, wooden or leather shield for protection while Slavic light troops sometimes resorted to larger rectangular- or oval-shaped wooden shields. Often light troops, both mounted and on foot, engaged in combat without the encumbrance of a shield, leaving their hands and arms free to use their primary weapons, which for cavalry consisted of bows, javelins, lassoes, and lances, and for infantry bows, javelins, and single- or two-handed slings. Secondary weapons, carried attached to waist or shoulder belts, included swords, daggers, and axes.

The mobility of its light troops was a strategic and tactical asset for any force operating in the Balkans. When the army was on the move, light troops were sent ahead of the main body to gather intelligence, capture and secure strategic objectives (i.e., mountain passes, river fords or bridges, and camp sites), secure terrain ideal for ambushes or traps into which the enemy could be lured, or simply guard the army's flanks during marches. When combat was joined, light troops were used as skirmishers ahead of the main battle lines (to either harass or soften the enemy for attack or dampen an enemy assault), served as flank guards and outriders, filled the gaps between the heavier units in battle lines, acted as reserve support in melees, guarded the baggage train or encampment in the rear areas, and played a leading role in ambushes. No matter which function (or combination thereof) the light troops were assigned, their principal weapon—the reflex composite bow, with an effective range of over 880 ft. (250 m) and an utterly deadly range of 330 ft. (100 m)—made them versatile and highly effective components of any army.<sup>61</sup>

Medium (also called regular or ordinary) troops formed the bulk of most forces fielded by the primary belligerents. These troops wore armor protecting their torsos (including their groin area and upper thighs) and heads, and carried shields for primary coverage. Torso armor consisted of a chain mail, scale, lamellar, quilted, or leather corselet worn over a thick or padded undergarment. For infantry, this corselet generally resembled a cuirass in form, although elbow-length sleeves or hanging strips (Gr: *pteronages*) were common, while for cavalry it extended down to protect much of the thighs by being split up the front and back. Because of its

expense, mail armor generally was restricted to the leadership and members of elite units, enjoying broader use among Byzantines than their enemies. Scale and lamellar armor was most popular among all of the belligerents since it was manufactured from commonly available materials like bone, leather, or wood, as well as metal. Of the two forms, lamellar armor was used more extensively than scale. The least expensive and easiest to manufacture were simple, thick leather or quilted corselets made from padded silk or wool. For those who could afford both, the quilted garment served as an underlay for the armored corselet.<sup>62</sup>

Head protection was provided by helmets, caps, or hoods. Similar to chain mail, metal helmets were expensive and initially restricted to the leadership and elite troops. Looting the battlefield during or after a battle, however, spread their possession more broadly within armies than otherwise might have been the case. A variety of helmet types and shapes were used, the most common being single-piece and riveted multi-piece types in conical, bowl, and casque forms. Some sported additional neck and face protection through mail, lamellar, or leather attachments, but there is no extant evidence for helmets with full visors. Caps made of thick felt enjoyed widespread use, often reinforced with bands of additional felt or strips of heavy linen or silk wrapped around them like turbans. Some Bulgarian and steppe troops who had no helmets or felt caps wore thick fur busbies or leather caps. A felt or leather cap often served as the underlay for a hood made of mail or lamellar, which frequently covered the face, except for the eyes. Metal helmets, hoods, and fur busbies were characteristic of cavalry while caps were common among infantry.<sup>63</sup>

The most important item of protective armor was the shield. Those used by medium troops, which were generally constructed of wood or leather stretched over a wooden frame, ranged from small, target-type ones to large, and were variously shaped. The most common large shield, used by both infantry and cavalry, was circular, with an average diameter of 30 in. (77 cm). Rectangular and oval shields, averaging some 4 ft. (1.2 m) in height and 2.5 ft. (77 cm) in width, also were carried, mostly by infantry. The exterior surfaces of some shields were reinforced with attached metal plates, and the famous kite-shaped shield first made its European appearance in Byzantine ranks.<sup>64</sup>

Regular troops carried an array of lethal weaponry. Iron-tipped lances (about 12 ft. [3.7 m] long) were used by cavalry as well as shorter spears (some 9 ft. [2.75 m] long) and javelins. The latter two also were primary

weapons of regular infantry. The composite reflex bow was a weapon used by both infantry and cavalry, with that of the foot troops being slightly larger than the bow used while mounted. Byzantine infantry at times reportedly employed something akin to a small crossbow but its usage may have been limited or intermittent. In addition to these primary arms, troops of both types carried secondary weapons girded to waist or shoulder belts or strung on saddles, if mounted. Such arms included straight or curved single- (for cavalry) and double-edged (for both cavalry and infantry) swords, curved sabers (for cavalry), iron- or stone-headed maces, daggers, single- or double-bladed axes, and caltrops.<sup>65</sup>

The Byzantines possessed one frightening weapon that none of the other belligerents had in their arsenals, a weapon so devastating in its effects that even the ferocious Rus' cringed at the thought of facing it. That weapon was "Greek (or liquid) fire" (Gr: *lampron* or *igron pyr*). Invented in the seventh century by Kallinikos, a Syrian engineer, "Greek fire" was the medieval equivalent of napalm, the composition of which is still debated but the ingredients probably included crude petroleum mixed with resin, sulphur, and other components. The liquid concoction was housed in a container under slight pressure and, when used, was pumped out through a swivel-mounted siphon tube and ignited, similar to a modern flamethrower, spewing out a flaming substance with adhesive properties that burned even on water and was difficult to extinguish. Originally designed to be mounted on ships for naval combat, in the tenth century Byzantine engineers created a small, portable version for land use by infantry. Despite its notoriety, there exists little evidence that "Greek fire" was used during the hegemonic wars beyond the siege of Vidin (1002) and Byzantine fleet operations on the Danube against the Rus'.<sup>66</sup>

Medium troops would be deployed either as entire units in battle line formations or mixed with heavy troops in combat units. All units were formed for battle with a depth of multiple ranks. In the case of mixed units, heavy troops were stationed as the first couple of ranks and usually as the last one, while medium troops filled the ranks in between, providing archery and melee support for the unit as a whole. Such deployment held for both infantry and cavalry.<sup>67</sup>

Heavy troops were the elite in the Bulgarian, Byzantine, and Rus' armies and were the combat shock troops *par excellence*, despite the fact that the Balkans' terrain limited the number of set-piece battles fought.

Heavy troops were little used in the opening phase of the wars, with both sides fielding forces composed of medium and light troops.<sup>68</sup> By the middle phase in the late ninth and early tenth century, heavy cavalry and infantry grew more common, and by the closing phase at least the Byzantines deployed them consistently. All mounted Byzantine tagmatic units were heavy, as most likely were the mounted retinues of the Bulgarian ruler and the Slavic *zhupani*. The retinues of the steppe allies were more medium than heavy cavalry, and the Rus' *druzhdina* that operated in Bulgaria was heavy infantry.

As their name implies, heavy troops sported a great amount of body armor. Their armored corselets covered not only their torsos but also their upper arms to the elbows and their thighs to the knees. Forearms and lower legs were covered with splinted wooden or metal vambraces, and heavy gloves and boots were also worn. Helmets were metal, often with lamellar or mail attachments protecting the neck and face. Heavy infantry carried large shields while the cavalry used smaller ones, including the target type. Primary weapons for heavy cavalry included lances, spears, bows, and iron maces, with swords and sabers as secondary arms. Heavy infantry wielded spears as primary weapons, supplemented by swords, daggers, maces, and axes. Since cavalry could be incapacitated on the battlefield by having their horses killed or crippled, heavy cavalry frequently rode horses wearing body armor. Horse armor commonly consisted of a skirt (carapace) made of thick quilted felt, leather, scale, or lamellar that draped over the front portion of the animal, reaching to below its knees. Horses' necks and hindquarters also could be covered. In the mid-tenth century Byzantine Emperor Nikephoros II Phokas reintroduced a super heavy cavalry troop type, originally known in late antique times—the cataphract. Cataphracts wore full mail or lamellar body armor, metal helmets, and gauntlets; carried shields; wielded either iron maces or sabers as primary weapons; and rode fully armored horses. Used more in the east against the Arabs than in the Balkans, no specific mention of cataphracts operating during the hegemonic wars is extant, although the *tagmata* thrown against the Rus' in 971 may have included them.<sup>69</sup>

Both the Byzantines and the Bulgarians employed specialized troops to man siege weapons against enemy fortifications. These troops resembled light infantry in their attire and often manufactured much of their weaponry and machines on site, carrying with them only crucial component parts. Siege artillery included rope-pulled, stone-throwing



trebuchets and torsion-powered, large arrow-or stone-firing ballistae. Other siege equipment included rams, hide-covered protective tortoises, ladders, borers, and large mounted masonry picks. The troops routinely used an array of axes, shovels, and hand picks, which could double as weapons, along with daggers and swords, if needed. The Byzantines enjoyed a long Roman tradition in siegecraft but the Bulgars and Slavs proved equally adept in that field, having benefited from longstanding associations with the Avars.<sup>70</sup>

### *Fortifications*

Initially, the Byzantines held the advantage regarding fortifications, in terms of material technology and sheer numbers. Having inherited such a tradition from their classical Roman predecessors. By the beginning of the hegemonic wars, virtually every Byzantine urban settlement in the Balkans was protected by rubble-filled, stone-and-brick-faced walls and a defensive perimeter. The more important administrative and commercial centers, such as Constantinople, Adrianople (m: Edirne), Thessaloniki, Serdika (B: Sredets; m: Sofia), Philippopolis (m: Plovdiv), and Dyrrakhion (m: Durrës), possessed strong walls with defense towers and moats. Others, usually smaller towns or larger-sized villages, were surrounded by simple curtain walls with few or no towers or moats. Such a small fortified center was known as a fort (*kastron*) rather than a town (*polis*).<sup>71</sup>

In the late sixth century, before the onset of the Avar and Slav incursions into the Balkans, the Eastern Roman Empire depended on an in-depth system of fortified frontier positions to protect its agricultural population, its vital trans-Balkan lines of overland communication, and its important coastal port-cities against threats emanating from beyond the empire's Danubian border in the north. This fortification system consisted of three concentric zones of positions stretching from the Danube River to Thrace, with the first situated along the southern bank of the river itself and anchored by such fortified towns as Belgrade, Vidin, and Dorostolon (B: Drüšťür; m: Silistra). The fortresses immediately adjacent to the river were backed by fortress towns and forts scattered over the Danubian Plain and Dobrudzha. These supporting positions mostly lay at important road intersections or defended passageways through local valleys (the fort at Belogradchik, in the western Balkan Mountains [B: Stara Planina (Old Mountains); Gr: Haimos] south of Vidin, is a naturally spectacular extant example).

The second zone encompassed fortified positions in the Balkan Mountains, the Sredna Gora, and the Dinaric Alps guarding the primary and more well known secondary roadways. These either commanded existing mountain basins through which those routes ran (Serdika was a prime example in the Sofia Basin) or defended the more accessible passes. The third zone of fortifications covered Thrace and the Western Thracian-Macedonian coastal plain. This belt was anchored by the extensive city fortifications of Adrianople, Philippopolis, and Thessaloniki, but forts and fortified towns were scattered throughout the two lowlands. The final Thracian defense line was the Long Wall, erected 40 miles (64 km) west of Constantinople by Emperor Anastasius I (491–518), which ran for 30 miles (48 km) from the Black Sea coast, in the north, to the Sea of Marmara, in the south. All port-cities lying on the coasts of the Black, Marmara, and Aegean seas were heavily fortified, including the imperial capital at Constantinople.<sup>72</sup>

Constantinople, then the largest city in Europe, was founded on the site of the ancient Greek colonial port of Byzantium by Roman emperor Constantine I and dedicated as his imperial residence in 330. It was situated in the extreme southeastern corner of Thrace on an easily defensible triangular bit of land lying on the western shore of the Bosphoros, at the point where that strait emptied into the Sea of Marmara. Directly on the city's north was the large, crescent-shaped mouth of a small river called the Golden Horn, which emptied into the Bosphoros. On its south stretched the Sea of Marmara, which found access to the Mediterranean through the Dardanelles Strait. By heavily fortifying the triangle of land on which the city sat, the Romans transformed Constantinople into an impregnable fortress-city, able to withstand any of the siege and assault technologies available during late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. For over a 1000 years the impenetrable land walls of Constantinople often saved both the city and the empire from defeat and, in some cases, from utter destruction at the hands of its enemies.

A single curtain sea wall, interspersed with hundreds of defense towers and built along the water's edge, girded the southern and northern sides of the city. Protecting the wide western land base of the triangle was the most extensive, and strongest, set of medieval walled defenses erected in Europe. Traditionally attributed to the year 413 during the reign of Emperor Theodosius II (408–450), but renovated and expanded by succeeding rulers (including Leo V [813–820] during the first decade of the hegemonic wars), the land walls' construction incorporated a series of

three successively higher and thicker stone ramparts protected by a wide moat. Standing at the inner lip of the moat was a simple curtain wall. Behind it lay a higher and thicker wall reinforced with 96 towers, and to its rear rose the last, which was even higher and thicker and also had 96 towers placed to cover the battlements between those of the wall to its front.<sup>73</sup>

The traditional East Roman strategy for defending the empire's Balkan possessions depended on frontier forces, using the extensive fortifications and mountain defenses, slowing enemy incursions and dampening any devastation that they might cause until provincial mobile field forces, often reinforced by the emperor's own elite units, could deal decisively with the intruders. Should the strategy of defense in depth prove insufficient, and an enemy broke through and defeated or evaded the mobile forces, then Constantinople became the empire's defensive position of last resort. By the opening of the hegemonic wars, however, all of the Danubian and Dobrudzhan fortifications, as well as most of those in the Balkan Mountains, were lost to the Bulgarians. Only the fortresses in Thrace and Western Thrace-Macedonia wholly remained in Byzantine hands. Despite changes in Byzantium's military organization, those fortified positions retained by the empire were expected to perform their traditional function. Constantinople frequently was called on to fulfill its role as the ultimate defensive position, especially during the opening and middle phases of the wars.<sup>74</sup>

Regarding fortifications, the Bulgarians originally relied on Bulgar traditions developed in the steppe country. Heavily influenced by Persian, Armenian, Sarmatian, and Alanic techniques, the Bulgars were adept at constructing earthworks capped by wooden or stone ramparts to protect both the territories under their control and their important administrative and military centers. Everywhere the Bulgars settled during their migration to the Balkans, they built such works, many of which stretched for extensive distances, and they continued the practice after crossing the Danube and establishing themselves in the northeastern Balkans during the late seventh century.<sup>75</sup>

Those lengthy fortifications erected to defend the Bulgars' frontiers characteristically consisted of four components: A palisade faced with wood or stone on both surfaces and filled with either dirt or stone rubble; an earthwork embankment on which the palisade sat; a berm at the exterior foot of the embankment; and a ditch protecting the entire front of the works, which might be filled with water if a source were available.

Such frontier fortifications were built in Bessarabia and Wallachia facing northward, to protect the early Bulgar Balkan state from threats off the Eurasian steppes. A series of westward-facing earthwork defenses were erected in the western Danubian Plain, running north-south between the Danube and the Balkan Mountains, to guard against potential Avar attacks from Pannonia. Another line of southward-facing, east-west works was built across Dobrudzha, extending from the elbow of the northern bend of the Danube to the Black Sea, as protection for the Bulgars' earliest Balkan conquests from the Byzantines.

The most important Bulgar frontier earthwork fortification of the hegemonic wars was the "Great Fence of Thrace" (B: *Erkesiya* ["The Cut Place," a much later term derived from Turkish roots]; Gr: *Megali souda*), built in the second decade of the ninth century following a treaty with Byzantium (816) ending the first phase of the wars and settling the two states' common border at the time. Stretching northeast-southwest from a bit north of the town of Debeltos (m: Debelt) near the Black Sea to the Maritsa River near Konstantsiya (m: Simeonovgrad), the fortification ran for 81 miles (131 km) through northern Thrace.<sup>76</sup>

Within its frontier entrenchments, Bulgaria exhibited a less sophisticated and extensive system of defensive fortifications than did Byzantium. Although the Bulgars acquired the old Byzantine forts and fortress cities of Dobrudzha, the Danubian Plain, and the northern Balkan Mountain foothills by the late seventh century, most of these were abandoned or sparsely populated when they were captured. Throughout the eighth century the Bulgar state depended more on its frontier earthworks than on rehabilitated former Byzantine fortifications for protection against outside threats, although its capital at Pliska and some other administrative-military centers, called *auls* ([princely] halls [palaces?]), were fortified.<sup>77</sup> With the opening of the hegemonic wars, the Bulgarians began constructing additional fortifications to supplement or supplant their border entrenchments.

Bulgarian fortifications underwent a transformation from the traditional earthwork type to more Byzantine-like stone works during the hegemonic wars' first century.<sup>78</sup> Illustrating the transformation from earthworks to stone fortifications were those of Bulgaria's two early medieval capitals, Pliska and Preslav.<sup>79</sup>

Pliska, the Bulgars' first Balkan capital, was founded in the late seventh century on the site of an abandoned East Roman city and evolved into the state's capital by the close of the eighth century. Situated where

the Danubian Plain met Dobrudzha, Pliska was a large fortified encampment similar in configuration to nomad winter camps found on the steppes. It was protected by a high, generally rectangular outer earthwork that ran a total of 13 miles (21 km), encompassing an area of 8.9 square miles (23 km<sup>2</sup>) and delineating the so-called “outer city,” which was sparsely populated on a continuing basis. In the center of the “outer city” was a small inner, citadel-like, trapezium-shaped fortification consisting of 1.79 miles (2.87 km) of walls enclosing an area of 124 acres (50 ha), within which were housed the important administrative structures and personal residences of the Bulgar rulers and their high officials, termed the “inner city.” The original inner fortifications were typical earthworks capped with a strong wooden palisade much like the outer works, but the exact nature of their construction currently is unknown. After the wooden structures of the “inner city” were burned during the opening campaigns of the hegemonic wars, they were later rebuilt in stone, resembling the walls of typical Byzantine provincial fortresses.<sup>80</sup>

Preslav, lying 25 miles (40 km) southwest of Pliska near the foothills of the eastern Balkan Mountains, became Bulgaria’s capital at the end of the ninth century. From its origin as an early ninth-century *aul*, Preslav essentially was an important administrative-military center for Bulgarian rulers. Similar to Pliska, Preslav’s encircling fortifications delineated a small, citadel-like “inner city” protected by a larger, surrounding “outer city.” Unlike Pliska, where the outer and inner fortifications initially were traditional earthworks with crowning wooden palisades, at Preslav they were Byzantine-like stone ramparts strengthened by towers from the beginning. Since Preslav existed as a specialized administrative and military center, its population always remained limited to those who either served in or serviced the rulers’ court (whereas Pliska provided a residence or refuge for a large general population and its animals), and its relatively small size reflected that situation. The outer defense walls ran for a total of only 4 miles (6.5 km) in a rough pentagonal configuration, enclosing an “outer city” of some 865 acres (350 ha) in area while the inner citadel walls’ circuit of 1.24 miles (2 km) protected an “inner city” merely 62 acres (25 ha) large, which was centered on the rulers’ palace. All of Preslav’s stone walls and towers, built during the ninth and early tenth centuries, followed typical Byzantine provincial models.<sup>81</sup>

When it came to dealing with their enemies’ fortifications during the hegemonic wars, both sides shared similar siege weapons technologies (projectile-firing artillery pieces and assault equipment) and similar

tactics (e.g., undermining walls through tunneling; inducing garrisons out of their fortifications for battle or ambush; or cutting off the garrison's supplies to force a surrender through actual or threatened starvation).<sup>82</sup> On the whole, they demonstrated relative parity in conducting both offensive and defensive siege warfare, if the number of successes enjoyed by both during the wars is used as the comparative barometer. Such is not surprising because numerous Byzantine engineers served in Bulgarian forces throughout the wars, either voluntarily or as captives given no choice by their captors. Ultimately, the impregnability of Constantinople's fortifications significantly contributed to Byzantium's total victory in the wars by ensuring that the Byzantines possessed an utterly secure military base for preserving their empire and organizing military countermoves against their enemies, no matter how dire the situation in the Balkans appeared at any given time. The Bulgarians enjoyed no comparable advantage in the fortifications of their capitals (Pliska, Preslav, and, later, Ohrid), all of which were captured or sacked by the Byzantines at least once during the wars. Except for the fall of Pliska in the earliest stage of the conflicts, those events generally spelled disaster for the Bulgarian state.

### *Tactics*

Tactics—the planned effective implementation of troop types, armament, unit formations, and maneuver in combat to bring about the enemy's defeat—were viewed as a science in Byzantium. Extant Byzantine treatises on tactics and strategy dating from the seventh through the early eleventh centuries provide a wealth of information about the Byzantines' approach toward conducting warfare. No other belligerent in the hegemonic wars took such a studied approach to the art of war. Much of our present knowledge about their Slavic and steppe enemies comes from the intelligence reports contained in many of the treatises, although, surprisingly, they include little specific information regarding their primary enemy—the Bulgarians. What is known about the Bulgarians' mode of operations during the wars has largely been extrapolated from the vague and frequently antiquarian accounts found in extant Byzantine sources.

Pitched battles were infrequent during the hegemonic wars both because of the Balkans' broken terrain and because the outcome of such engagements could rarely be predicted with any certainty. The

Byzantines explicitly and the Bulgarians implicitly tried to avoid battles by resorting to maneuver, flanking or surprise attacks, setting traps and ambushes, and breaking their enemy's morale through ravaging their territories. When a set-piece battle proved unavoidable, the armies faced each other in lines of battle. During the early and middle phases of the wars, both sides used similar two-line battle formations. Medium or heavy infantry or cavalry units were stationed in the center of the front line with cavalry deployed on the flanks. Light troops were scattered in advance of the line to act as skirmishers. The second line could mirror the first or be comprised exclusively of cavalry. A small reserve force would be stationed behind the two lines. Light cavalry units were placed beyond each flank of the first line to serve as flank attackers against the enemy's lines or as flank guards for their own, while other light units guarded the force's rear areas. Once combat commenced, the light troops serving as skirmishers retired to their own lines, where they served as a reserve or filled gaps between the line units.<sup>83</sup>

Although little is known specifically about Bulgarian infantry formations during the wars, Byzantine infantry during the ninth and early tenth centuries fought in something akin to a traditional phalanx formation when drawn up in line of battle. Presumably, the Bulgarians did the same. The Rus' employed a phalanx-like shield-wall formation during their tenth-century interventions in Bulgaria). Most combat was undertaken by opposing cavalry units while the infantry served as reserves. By the mid-tenth century the Byzantines, starting with Nikephoros II Phokas, implemented new tactical formations reflecting a turn toward a more aggressive imperial policy, which emphasized coordinated cavalry and infantry attacks in battle. This new approach elevated the combat role of heavy troops and resulted in the creation of cataphract cavalry, who attacked in a triangular formation protruding forward from the regular line of battle, and a novel infantry formation. The infantry was drawn up in large, multi-unit squares resembling the form of the army's mandatory campaign encampments. Cavalry units initially were stationed within the square, from which they sallied forth to form line and engage in battle, and to which they could retire for protection or to reform during combat. The infantry was trained to maneuver quickly from square to line formation as needed for any given situation during the battle.<sup>84</sup>

Archery played a leading role in combat. Clouds of arrows were used to "soften" enemy ranks in preparation for assaults against them, to disrupt or blunt attacks by the enemy, and to harass and cow the enemy.

Until the final stages of the hegemonic wars, the Bulgarians and the steppe forces generally “out-bowed” the Byzantines. Archery harmonized well with their mounted warrior ethos, grounded in speed and mobility on the battlefield, while the Byzantines seem to have permitted the bow to lapse as a primary weapon after the early seventh century, relying instead on steppe or Arab mercenaries to supply archery firepower. With the turn toward more aggressive, offensive warfare in the mid-tenth century, archery was reintroduced among Byzantine troops on a wide scale, becoming a crucial weapon used by most infantry and cavalry units.<sup>85</sup>

Both sides during the wars avoided pitched battles by resorting to maneuvers that would tilt the scales of combat in their favor once any fighting began. Such maneuvers included feigned retreats, in which all or some of the enemy units were lured by retreating units into a pre-arranged trap sprung by concealed units that, taking advantage of terrain, fell on the flanks or rear of the unsuspecting and often disorganized enemy pursuers. Another common ploy was the ambush, in which one force occupied commanding terrain (usually narrow or wooded mountain passes or river fording sites) through which the unsuspecting enemy must march and then launching a surprise attack from advantageous ground. Often ambushes were combined with traps by throwing obstacles in front or behind the enemy once they entered the designated terrain. Smaller scale ambushes were sprung on enemy detachments (e.g., foragers or horse herders) to shake enemy morale or disrupt their operations. Also used were night attacks, surprise flanking attacks, and encirclements.<sup>86</sup>

Early medieval combat was a vicious, bloody, and messy business. Eyes were gouged out by arrows; skulls were crushed and bones shattered by iron maces; bodies were gashed and slashed by swords and sabers; heads and limbs were lopped off by axes; torsos were skewered by spears or javelins; gore and blood splashed everywhere. Given such scenarios, and numerous additional variants, one might ask why men willingly subjected themselves to such unimaginable enormities. There exists no pat answer to the question. To claim that human animal instinct was the motivator would be trite but not altogether inaccurate. Another possible reason was loyalty to or dependency upon the leader or commander. The prospect of winning recognized honors or acquiring a higher social standing through battlefield performance was a factor, but one can suspect that the baser desires to rape, pillage, and plunder also played a part. A strong



sense of defending one's home or religious belief was present among some. Whatever the participants' underlying motives, they required nurturing and maintenance by the commanders to ensure a high level of morale among the troops when deadly combat erupted. During the wars both sides attempted to achieve this by imposing discipline on their troops and by conducting pre-battle religious rituals, whether pagan or Christian, with the implied message that imminent death or mutilation bore spiritual rewards. Whatever the motivations, troops of both sides braved the terrible carnage throughout two centuries.<sup>87</sup>

## NOTES

1. *BVA*, 143; D.P. Hupchick and H.E. Cox, *The Palgrave Concise Historical Atlas of the Balkans* (New York, 2001), Map 6; V. Tüpkova-Zaimova, "Küm vŭprosa za voennite pŭtishta prez Pŭrvoto bŭlgarsko tsarstvo," *IPr* 14, no. 1 (1958): 58–73; K. Jireček, "Voenniyat pŭt ot Belgrad do Tsarigrad i balkanskite prohodi. Istoriko-geografska studiya," *BIB* 4, no. 4 (1931–1932): 1–162; *EHB* 1, L. Angeliki, et al., eds. (Washington, DC, 2002), 57f, 65–66; J. Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World, 565–1204* (London, 1999), 54f; R. Chevallier, *Roman Roads* (London, 1976).
2. J.W. Sedlar, *East Central Europe in the Middle Ages, 1000–1500* (Seattle, WA, 1994), 14f; G. Bakalov, "Religious Aspects of Medieval State Ideology in the European Southeast," in *State and Church: Studies in Medieval Bulgaria and Byzantium*, V. Gyuzelev and K. Petkov, eds. (Sofia, 2011), 31–46; P. Sophoulis, *Byzantium and Bulgaria, 775–831* (Leiden, 2012), chaps. 2.2.1 and 8.1.
3. J. Haldon, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century: The Transformation of a Culture* (Cambridge, 1990); G. Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, 2nd Eng. ed., J.M. Hussey, trans. (New Brunswick, NJ, 1969), chap. 2; W. Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society* (Stanford, CA, 1997), pt. III, chap. 9; M. Whittow, *The Making of Byzantium, 600–1025* (Berkeley, CA, 1996), 48f, 77f, 82f; A. Toynbee, *Constantine Porphyrogenitus and His World* (London, 1973), 79–80, 88f, and pt. V, annex III.
4. W. Treadgold, *Byzantium and Its Army, 284–1081* (Stanford, CA, 1995), 23f, 64f, 72–73, 98f, 104f; J. Haldon, *Warfare, State, and Society in the Byzantine World* (London, 1999), 74f, 109f, 115f; Toynbee, pt. II, chap. 4; H. Ahrweiler, "Recherches sur l'administration de l'empire byzantin aux IXè–XIè siècles," *BCH* 84 (1960): 1–109; Ostrogorsky, *History*, 96f, 132f, 157f; W.E. Kaegi, "Some Reconsiderations on the

- Themes,” *JÖBG* 16 (1967): 39–53; A. Pertusi, “La formation des thèmes byzantins,” *Berichte zum XI. Internationalen Byzantinisten Kongress* (Munich, 1958), 1–40.
5. J. Haldon, *Recruitment and Conscription in the Byzantine Army c. 550–950: A Study on the Origins of the Stratiotika Ktemata* (Vienna, 1979); Treadgold, *ibid.*, 23f, 108–109, 165f, 173f; *id.*, “The Military Lands and the Imperial Estates in the Middle Byzantine Empire,” *HUS* 7 (Cambridge, MA, 1983), 619–631.
  6. Treadgold, *ibid.*, 67; *id.*, *The Byzantine State Finances in the Eighth and Ninth Centuries* (Boulder, CO, 1982). Treadgold’s figures, given in our text, probably represented paper strengths rather than active troops. Toynbee, 286f, drew a distinction between first- and second-line troops, claiming only the former were fielded in cases other than emergencies.
  7. Treadgold, *Byzantium and Its Army*, 67. Byzantine field armies in the Balkans may rarely have exceeded 20,000 men. See: J. Haldon, “Theory and Practice in Tenth-Century Military Administration: chapters II, 44 and 45 of the *Book of Ceremonies*,” *TM* 13 (2000), 305f; *id.*, *Warfare, State and Society*, 102–103; Sophoulis, 78 and n.
  8. Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society*, 198, 208–209, 222, 265f.
  9. J. Haldon, *Byzantine Praetorians: An Administrative, Institutional, and Social Survey of the Opsikion and Tagmata, c. 580–900* (Bonn, 1984); R. D’Amato, *Byzantine Imperial Guardsmen, 925–1025: The Tagmata and Imperial Guard* (Oxford, 2012). Our text follows Treadgold, *op. cit.*, 67, 102f, for tagmatic strengths. Others argue for significantly smaller strengths. When the emperor did not campaign, supreme field command usually devolved onto the commander of the Schools *tagma*, the domestic of the Schools.
  10. Treadgold, *ibid.*, 106f.
  11. Toynbee, 311f; Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society*, 212f. The appearance of thematic *tagmata* coincided with the shift in Byzantine military posture from the defensive to the offensive that characterized the late tenth and early eleventh centuries. See: E.N. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire* (Cambridge, MA, 2009), chap. 14; Haldon, *ibid.*, 123f; *id.*, “Military Service, Military Lands, and the Status of Soldiers: Current Problems and Interpretations,” *DOP* 47 (1993): 1–67.
  12. J.H. Pryor and E.M. Jeffreys, *The Age of the Dromon: The Byzantine Navy, ca. 500–1204* (Leiden, 2006); Luttwak, chap. 13; H. Ahrweiler, *Byzance et la mer: La marine de guerre, la politique et les institutions maritimes de Byzance aux VIIIè–XVè siècles* (Paris, 1966); Toynbee, pt. II, chap. 7.
  13. Treadgold, *Byzantium and Its Army*, 67, 74. D’Amato, 27, gave 12,000 “professional warriors manning vessels.”

14. Toynbee, 331f, 336f; Pryor and Jeffreys, 175f, 448; Luttwak, 326f, 333f.
15. Luttwak, pt. III, chaps. 11–12, 14.
16. Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society*, 228f.
17. D. Angelov, *Obrazuvane na bŭlgarskata narodnost*, pts. 2 and 3; Iv. Duichev, “Slavyani i prabŭlgari,” *III* 1–2 (1951): 190–216; P. Petrov, *Obrazuvane na bŭlgarskata dŭrzhava* (Sofia, 1981); H. Gandev, *Formation and Establishment of the Bulgarian Nation*, R. Iosifova, trans. (Sofia, 1987); D. Angelov, “Formation and Development of the Bulgarian Nationality (Ninth to Twelfth Centuries),” *BHR*, no. 1 (1973): 49–64.
18. Angelov, *Obrazuvane*, pt. 4; *IB* 2, D. Kosev, et al., eds. (Sofia, 1981), pt. III, chap. 2, Sect. 4; V. Gyuzelev, *The Adoption of Christianity in Bulgaria*, N. Panova, trans. (Sofia, 1976); S. Runciman, *A History of the First Bulgarian Empire* (London, 1930), 121f; R. Sullivan, “Khan Boris and the Conversion of Bulgaria: A Case Study of the Impact of Christianity on a Barbarian Society,” *SMRH* 3 (1966): 55–139; J.V.A. Fine, Jr., *The Early Medieval Balkans: A Critical Survey from the Sixth to the Late Twelfth Century* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1983), 127f.
19. V. Tŭpkova-Zaimova, “L’idée byzantine de l’unité du monde et l’État bulgare,” *Actes du Premier congrès international des études balkaniques* 3 (Sofia, 1969), 291–298; id., “L’idée impériale à Byzance et la tradition étatique bulgare,” *Vyzantina* 3 (1971): 289–295.
20. Bulgar origins were expressed and preserved in their legendary “Ruler List.” For a recent English translation, see *The Voices of Medieval Bulgaria, Seventh-Fifteenth Century: The Records of a Bygone Culture* (hereafter, *Voices*), K. Petkov, comp., ed., and trans. (Leiden, 2008), 3–5. For studies of the list, see: M. Moskov, *Imennik na bŭlgarskite hanove (Novo tŭlkuvane)* (Sofia, 1988); S. Runciman, “The Bulgarian Princes’ List,” in *Ancient Bulgaria* 2, A. Poulter, ed. (Nottingham, 1983), 232–241.
21. For the early Bulgars, see: R. Rashev, *Prabŭlgarite i bŭlgarskoto hanstvo na Dunav* (Sofia, 2001); Iv. Bozhilov and V. Gyuzelev, *Istoriya na Bŭlgariya vŭv tri toma* 1, *Istoriya na srednovekovna Bŭlgariya, VII–XIV vek* (Sofia, 1999), pt. 2, chap. 2; V. Gyuzelev, *The Proto-Bulgarians: Pre-History of Asparouhian Bulgaria*, Yu. Stefanova, trans. (Sofia, 1979), 12f; P. Dobrev, *Prabŭlgarite. Proizhod, ezik, kultura (Nov prochit)* (Sofia, 1991); P. Tzvetkov, *A History of the Balkans: A Regional Overview from a Bulgarian Perspective* 1 (Lewiston, NY, 1993), 73f; V. Beshevliev, *Pŭrvobŭlgarite* (Sofia, 1984); Sophoulis, 105f.
22. Theophanes Confessor. *The Chronicle of ... : Byzantine and Near Eastern History*, ad 284–813 (hereafter, Theophanes), C. Mango and R. Scott, eds. and trans. (Oxford, 1997), 497–498; Nikephoros, Patriarch of

- Constantinople, *Short History* (hereafter, Nik. Pat.), C. Mango, ed. and trans. (Washington, DC, 1990), 86–89.
23. Theophanes, *ibid.*; Nik. Pat., *ibid.*
  24. Ts. Stepanov, *Vlast i avtoritet v rannosrednovkovna Bŭlgariya* (Sofia, 1999); T. Slavova, *Vladetel i administratsiya v rannosrednovkovna Bŭlgariya* (Sofia, 2010); R. Rashev, “Bog i vladetel predi pokrŭstvaneto,” in *Bog i tsar v bŭlgarskata istoriya*, T. Totev, et al., eds. (Plovdiv, 1996), 39–44; V. Gyuzelev, *Kavhanite i ichirgu boilite na bŭlgarskoto hanstvo-tsarstvo (VI–XI v.)* (Plovdiv, 2007); Iv. Duichev, *Medioevo bizantino-slavo 1, Saggi di storia politica e culturale* (Rome, 1965), 231–44; Iv. Venedikov, *Voennoto i administrativnoto ustroistvo na Bŭlgariya prez IX i X vek. Izsledvane* (Sofia, 1979); Sophoulis, chaps. 2.2.1–2.8.1.
  25. Our study’s depiction is based on conjectural reconstructions in: *BVIF*, S. Atanasov, et al., eds. (Sofia, 1958), 42f, 52f; *IB 5 VI*, D. Zafirov and E. Aleksandrov, eds. (Sofia, 2007), 57–59; Sophoulis, 76–79; Gyuzelev, *The Proto-Bulgarians*, 45, 47f; *id.*, “Voennoto izkustvo na prabŭlgarite (I–VII v.),” *Trinadeset veka v mir i bran* (Sofia, 1978), 26–34; R.K. Rumenin, “Po voennoto delo na prabŭlgarite prez perioda V–VII v.,” *IVND* 19–20 (1975): 201–211; A. Kalinkov, “Voennoto izkustvo pri obrazuvaneto na slavyano-bŭlgarskata dŭrzhava,” *VISb* 1, no. 1 (1962): 45–59.
  26. *BVIF*, 53–54; R. Browning, *Byzantium and Bulgaria: A Comparative Study Across the Early Medieval Frontier* (Berkeley, CA, 1975), 134. Sophoulis, 78–79, and G.N. Nikolov, *Tsentralizŭm i regionalizŭm v rannosrednovkovna Bŭlgariya* (Sofia, 2005), 114–115, posited that the largest Bulgar forces did not exceed 10,000–12,000 men, only 3000 of whom were cavalry.
  27. For the *sarakt*, see: P. Georgiev, “Bŭlgarskiyat sarakton v Trakiya,” *Arheologiya* 48, no. 1–4 (2007): 192–205; R. Rashev, “Krumoviyat sarakt v Trakiya,” in *Traki i Hemimont IV–XIV vek* 1 (Varna, 2007), 120–127. The elite troops were designated in Bulgar inscriptions written in Greek *threptoi anthropoi* (“kept men”).
  28. Sophoulis, 79; Browning, *ibid.*, 133–135. Bulgar military discipline and armament inspections were mentioned by Pope Nicholas I (858–867) in an 866 letter to Han Boris. See Nicholas I [Pope], *The Responses of ... to the Questions of the Bulgars, A.D. 866 (Letter 99)* [hereafter, Pope Nich., *Responses*], W.L. North, trans., resp. 25 and 40, at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/866nicholas-bulgar.html>.
  29. For an overview of the traditional theory, see F. Curta, *The Making of the Slavs: History and Archaeology of the Lower Danube Region, c. 500–700* (Cambridge, 2001), 6f. P.M. Barford, *The Early Slavs: Culture and Society in Early Medieval Eastern Europe* (Ithaca, NY, 2001), chap. 1, and 43–46, argued the accretion approach.

30. See: Prokopios, *Procopius 4: History of the Wars*, H.B. Dewing, ed. and trans. (London, 1924), VII, xiv, 22–30; *Maurice's Strategikon: Handbook of Byzantine Military Strategy* (hereafter, Maurice), G.T. Dennis, trans. and ed. (Philadelphia, 1984), 120; F. Dvornik, *The Making of Central and Eastern Europe* (London, 1949), 280f; id., *The Slavs: Their Early History and Civilization* (Boston, 1956), 23. V.A. Zlatarski, *IBDSV 1/1*, 2nd ed., P. Petrov, ed. (Sofia, 1970), 52, thought the Antes were the ancestors of the Slavs who settled the eastern and central Balkans and the Slaveni were the ancestors of those who settled in the Balkans' northwest.
31. Curta, *The Making of the Slavs*, Conclusion.
32. *Ibid.*, 90f; Fine, *Early Medieval Balkans*, chap. 2; Bozhilov and Gyuzelev, pt. 1, chap. 2; Barford, 55f, 68f; O. Pritsak, "The Slavs and the Avars," in *Gli Slavi occidentali e meridionali nell'alto medioevo* (Spoleto, 1983), 353–435; F. Dvornik, *Les Slaves, Byzance et Rome au IXe siècle* (Paris, 1926), 3f; Toynbee, annex III.
33. Treadgold, *A History*, 278–280; C. Mango, *Byzantium: The Empire of New Rome* (New York, 1980), 69f; W. Rosen, *Justinian's Flea: Plague, Empire, and the Birth of Europe* (New York, 2007).
34. Constantine Porphyrogenetos, *DAI*, G. Moravcsik, ed., and R.J.H. Jenkins, trans. (Washington, DC, 1967), chaps. 29–36; Dvornik, *The Making of*, app. I.
35. Toynbee, 94–95, 102n, 105–106.
36. Curta, *Making of the Slavs*, 325f; Barford, 126–128. Tzvetkov, 105, posited that an average eighth-century Slavic tribe numbered between 10,000 and 15,000 individuals.
37. Prokopios, *Wars*, VII, xiv, 22; F. Curta, *Southeastern Europe in the Middle Ages, 500–1250* (Cambridge, 2006), 18 and n.
38. Browning, *Byzantium and Bulgaria*, 126–127. See Theophanes, 603, for the independent leeway granted the Bulgar state's Severi Slav *zhupan*, Slavun (Gr: Sklavounos).
39. Browning, *ibid.*, 127.
40. *Ibid.*, 133; Prokopios, *Wars*, VII, *passim*; Maurice, 120–126; *BVIF*, 11–29.
41. Prokopios, *ibid.*, xxxviii, 1 (3000 men); *BVIF*, 13.
42. *BVIF*, 13, 43f; Barford, 140–143; Curta, *Making of the Slavs*, 321, 323.
43. *BVIF*, 14, 44f; Barford, 143–144.
44. For early Magyar history, see: A. Róna-Tas, *Hungarians and Europe in the Early Middle Ages: An Introduction to Early Hungarian History*, N. Bodoczky, trans. (Budapest, 1999), pt. 2, chap. IV, Sect. 3 a-e, pt. 3, chap. VI; P.F. Sugar, et al., eds., *A History of Hungary* (Bloomington, IN, 1990), 8f; G. Moravcsik, *Byzantium and the Magyars*,

- S.R. Rosenbaum, trans. (Budapest, 1970), 37f; P. Lendvai, *The Hungarians: A Thousand Years of Victory in Defeat* (Princeton, NJ, 2003), 12f; P. Engel, *The Realm of St. Stephen: A History of Medieval Hungary, 895–1526* (London, 2001), 8f.
45. *DAI*, chaps. 39–40; C.A. Macartney, *The Magyars in the Ninth Century* (Cambridge, 1930), 90f; Róna-Tas, pt. 4, chap. XIII.
46. Sugar, et al., eds., 10–11; S.B. Várdy, *Historical Dictionary of Hungary* (Lanham, MD, 1997), 3; Róna-Tas, 353.
47. Toynbee, pt. III, chap. 5, app. II; R. Grousset, *The Empire of the Steppes: A History of Central Asia*, N. Walford, trans. (New Brunswick, NJ, 1970), 181; Macartney, 79, 83f; Róna-Tas, 418–419.
48. Grousset, 80f.
49. *DAI*, chap. 37; Macartney, 22f; Róna-Tas, pt. 2, chap. IV, Sect. 3 g; P. Diaconu, *Les Petchénègues au Bas-Danube* (Bucharest, 1970).
50. O.J. Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns: Studies in Their History and Culture*, M. Knight, ed. (Berkeley, CA, 1973), 401.
51. *DAI*, chap. 37.
52. S. Guldescu, *History of Medieval Croatia* (The Hague, 1964), chaps. III–VI; I. Goldstein, *Croatia: A History*, N. Jovanović, trans. (London, 1999), 13f; M. Tanner, *Croatia: A Nation Forged in War* (New Haven, CT, 1997), chap. 1; Fine, *Early Medieval Balkans*, the first half of chap. 8; Curta, *Southeastern Europe, 134f*; Dvornik, *The Slavs: Early History*, 122f.
53. *DAI*, chaps. 32–35; S.M. Ćirković, *The Serbs*, V. Tošić, trans. (Oxford, 2004), chap. 1.
54. Barford, 234; S. Franklin and J. Shepard, *The Emergence of Rus, 750–1200* (London, 1996), 28–29; G. Vernadsky, *Ancient Russia* (New Haven, CT, 1943), 276–278.
55. McGeer, *Sowing the Dragon's Teeth*, 208–209.
56. *RPC*, S.H. Cross and O.P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor, eds. and trans. (Cambridge, MA, 1953), 51–119; Franklin and Shepard, chaps. 1–4; G. Vernadsky, *Kievan Russia* (New Haven, CT, 1948), chaps. I–III, chap. IV, Sect. 1; G. Jones, *A History of the Vikings* (London, 1968), pt. III, chap. 4. See S. Blöndal, *The Varangians of Byzantium: An Aspect of Byzantine Military History*, B.S. Benedikz, trans. and rev. (Cambridge, 1978), for the Varangian Guard.
57. Barford, 102–103; Franklin and Shepard, 50f.
58. Jones, 152–153, 194; Franklin and Shepard, 45–46, 49–50, 52f, 117; Vernadsky, *Kievan Russia*, 192–193; W.K. Hanak, “The Infamous Svjatoslav: Master of Duplicity in War and Peace;,” in *Peace and War in Byzantium: Essays in Honor of George T. Dennis, S.J.*, T.S. Miller and J. Nesbitt, eds. (Washington, DC, 1995), 141n, 145–146.

59. Franklin and Shepard, 143f, 149; McGeer, *Sowing the Dragon's Teeth*, 294f; D. Angelov and B. Cholpanov, *Bŭlgarska voenna istoriya prez sred-novekovieto (X–XV vek)* (Sofia, 1994), 15f, 26f.
60. For the Bulgars and Slavs, see: Maurice, 121; *IB* 5 VI, 52f; V. Iotsov, *Vŭorŭzhenie i snaryazhenieto ot bŭlgarskoto srednovekovie (VII–XI v.)* (Varna, 2004); K. Konstantinov, "Kŭm vŭprosa za vŭorŭzhenieto v Pŭrvoto bŭlgarsko tsarstvo," in *Nauchni izsledvaniya v chest na professor Ivan Karaiotov po sluchai negovata 70-godishnina*, Iv. Jordanov, et al., eds. (Shumen, 2011): 293–297; G. Tsankova-Petkova, "Materialnata kultura i voennoto izkustvo na dakiiskite slavyani," *IIBI* 7 (1958): 329–346; M. Harbova, *Otbraniitelni sŭorŭzheniya v bŭlgarskoto srednovekovie* (Sofia, 1981); L. Bobcheva, "Vyorŭzhenieto na slavyani i pŭrvobŭlgari (ot VII do nachaloto na IX v.)," *VISb* 26, no. 3 (1957): 41–77.
61. McGeer, *Sowing the Dragon's Teeth*, 208–209, 211–212, 265, 267, 300–301, 331–332; Toynbee, 314–315; Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society*, 129f; *BVIF*, 54f, 60f, 103f, 110f; *IB* 5 VI, 60–62; D. Nicolle, *Medieval Warfare Source Book 2, Christian Europe and Its Neighbors* (London, 1996.), 68, 70, 73–74, 76–78.
62. T. Dawson, *Byzantine Infantryman: Eastern Roman Empire, c. 900–1204* (Oxford, 2007), 20, 22–23; I. Heath, *Byzantine Armies, 886–1118* (London, 1979), 6f; McGeer, *ibid.*, 212; Haldon, *ibid.*, 129; *ODB* 1, A.P. Kazhdan, et al., eds. (Oxford, 1991), 182–183; *BVIF*, 73f; G. Feher, *Obklekoto i orŭzhieto na starata bŭlgarska voiska* (Sofia, 1942), 18f; D. Ovcharov, "Vyorŭzhenieto na rannosrednovekovnata bŭlgarska konnitsa," *Vekove*, no. 5 (1975): 31–34.
63. McGeer, *ibid.*, 205, 214, 216; Dawson, 20; Nicolle, 76; Feher, *ibid.*, 27f; *BVIF*, 70–71.
64. McGeer, *ibid.*, 205–206; 208, 212; Dawson, 23–24; Heath, 8; Nicolle, 76; *BVIF*, 16–17, 69–70, 74–75.
65. McGeer, *ibid.*, 206, 208, 213, 216–217, 272, 286, 309–310, 313; Dawson, 24–25; Heath, 8–10; Nicolle, 74–75; Iv. Kŭnev, "Rannosrednovekovni sabi vŭv fonda na Natsionalniya istoricheski muzei," *INIM* 20 (2009): 44–51; *BVIF*, 61f, 64f, 67f, 74–75; *IB* 5 VI, 59f; Feher, *op. cit.*, 38f, 42–52; Toynbee, 314–315; Barford, 141–142.
66. J. Haldon and M. Byrne, "A Possible Solution to the Problem of Greek Fire," *BZ* 70 (1977): 91–99; J.R. Partington, *A History of Greek Fire and Gunpowder* (Cambridge, 1960), 1–41; Toynbee, 329f; Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society*, 138; McGeer, 65–66; Luttwak, 323f; P. Charanis, "Chemical Warfare in the Middle Ages. Kallinikos Prepared Fire," *Journal of Chemical Education* 14, no. 8 (1937): 360–365.
67. See: Maurice, bks. II, III, and XII; *The Taktika of Leo VI* (hereafter, *Taktika*), G.T. Dennis, trans. and ed. (Washington, DC, 2010), consts.

- 4, 7, 12–14; *Præcepta militaria* of Emperor Nikephoros II Phokas (hereafter, *Præcepta*), in E. McGeer, *Sowing the Dragon's Teeth: Byzantine Warfare in the Tenth Century* (Washington, DC, 1995), chap. IV; Nikephoros Ouranos, *Taktika*, in McGeer, *Sowing the Dragon's Teeth*, chaps. 56–57, 61; and *Anonymous Byzantine Treatise on Strategy (Peri strategikes, de re strategica)* (hereafter, *Anonymous Treatise*), in *Three Byzantine Military Treatises*, chaps. 15–17, for Byzantine unit troop mix. There are no extant similar sources for the Bulgarians.
68. Toynbee, 311f; Browning, *Byzantium and Bulgaria*, 133f.
69. Toynbee, *ibid.*; Browning, *ibid.*; McGeer, *Sowing the Dragon's Teeth*, 203f; Heath, 10; Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society*, 130f; Nicolle, 79; *BVIF*, 73f; M. Speidel, “Catafractarii and the Rise of the Later Roman Mailed Cavalry,” *EA* 4 (1984): 151–156.
70. *ODB* 1, 195; *Siegecraft: Two Tenth-Century Instructional Manuals by “Heron of Byzantium”* (hereafter, Heron, *Siegecraft*), D.F. Sullivan, ed. and trans. (Washington, DC, 2000); *BVIF*, 78f; *IB* 5 VI, 66–68; G. Soleva, “Voina tehnika, izpolzuvana ot bŭlgarskata voiska prez sred-novekovieto,” *INVM* 4 (1980): 19–27; Haldon, *ibid.*, 183f; Dawson, 26; Nicolle, 83–85.
71. C. Foss and D. Winfield, *Byzantine Fortifications: An Introduction* (Pretoria, IL, 1986); Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society*, 249f; Browning, *Byzantium and Bulgaria*, 91f; D. Ovcharov, “Rannovizantiisko krepostno stroitelstvo po nashite zemi, V–VII v.,” *ibid.*, 29 (1974): 223–248. For *kastrons*, see A. Dunn, “The Transformation from *Polis* to *Kastron* in the Balkans (III–VII cc.): General and Regional Perspectives,” *BMGS* 18 (1994): 60–80.
72. Prokopios of Caesarea, in *On the Buildings (Procopius 7)*, H.B. Dewing [with G. Downey], trans. and ed., [London, 1940]; Curta, *Making of the Slavs*, chap. 4, esp. 150f; J.G. Crow, “The Long Walls of Thrace,” in *Constantinople and Its Hinterland*, C. Mango and G. Dagron, eds. (Aldershot, 1995), 110–119; R.M. Harrison, “*To macron Teichos*, The Long Wall in Thrace,” in *Roman Frontier Studies 1969*, E. Birley, et al., eds. (Cardiff, 1974), 244–248; M. Whitby, “The Long Walls of Constantinople,” *Byzantion* 55 (1985): 560–583.
73. A. Van Millingen, *Byzantine Constantinople: The Walls of the City and Adjoining Historical Sites* (London, 1899); B.C.P. Tsangadas, *The Fortifications and Defense of Constantinople* (Boulder, CO, 1980); S. Turnbull, *The Walls of Constantinople, AD 324–1453* (Oxford, 2004).
74. Treadgold, *Byzantium and Its Army*, 9f; J.F. Haldon, *The Byzantine Wars: Battles and Campaigns of the Byzantine Era* (Stroud, UK, 2001), 23–24, 45f.
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82. Heron, *Siegecraft*; *BVIF*, 78f; *IB* 5 VI, 66–68; Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society*, 183f, E. McGeer, “Byzantine Siege Warfare in Theory and Practice,” in *The Medieval City under Siege*, I.A. Corfis and M. Wolfé, eds. (Rochester, NY, 1999), 123–129.
83. Maurice, bks. II, III, and VIII, chap. 2; *Taktika*, consts. 12–14; *Anonymous Treatise*, chap. 32; *BVIF*, 103f; Haldon, *ibid.*, 205–206, 212–215.
84. Maurice, bk. III, XII B.; *Præcepta*, chaps. I–IV; Ouranos, chaps. 56–61; *Anonymous Treatise*, chaps. 14–15, 17–18, 21–25, 35–37; Haldon, *ibid.*, 197f, 208f; *BVIF*, *ibid.*; Nicolle, 70–71.
85. *Anonymous Treatise*, chaps. 44–47; *Præcepta*, chap. I; *BVIF*, 61f; McGeer, *Sowing the Dragon’s Teeth*, 206f, 270f; Toynbee, 314–315.
86. *Taktika*, consts. 14, 17; *Anonymous Treatise*, chaps. 20, 39–40; *Skirmishing (Liber de Velitatione bellica)* (hereafter, *Skirmishing*), in *Three Byzantine Military Treatises*, G.T. Dennis, ed. and trans. (Washington, DC, 1985), chaps. 4, 11–13, 17; *Campaign Organization and Tactics (Liber de Re militari)* (hereafter, *Campaign Organization*), in *Three Byzantine Military Treatises*, chaps. 7, 11–12, 14, 20, 23, 25; *BVIF*, 108f; *IB* 5 VI, 49–50; Toynbee, 110f, 312f; Haldon, *ibid.*, 178–179, 202; and McGeer, *ibid.*, 255, 321–322, for alternatives to set-piece battles.
87. *Taktika*, consts. 2, 8, 16, 20 *passim*; *Præcepta*, chap. VI; *Skirmishing*, chap. 19; *Campaign Organization*, chap. 28; Pope Nich., *Responses*, #25, 35, 40; Haldon, *ibid.*, 228f, 264f; *BVIF*, 88f.

## Prelude: Establishment and Survival of the Bulgar State, 679–803

By the third quarter of the seventh century Byzantium was reeling from blows inflicted by the Avars and Slavs in the Balkans, and by the Persians and Arabs in West Asia and Africa. The empire lost Syria, Palestine, and Egypt to militant Islamic Arab expansion, and with them went a wealth

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The following works provided the basic informational framework for the text of this prelude: Theophanes, 497–646, *passim*; Nik. Pat., chaps. 35–82, *passim*; John Zonaras, *Epitome historiarum*, in *GIBI* 7, S. Lishev, et al., eds. (Sofia, 1968), chaps. 11–22, *passim*; *Voices*, 23; Bozhilov and Gyuzelev, pt. 2, chaps. 3–5; Zlatarski, *IBDSV* 1/1, 176–321; Mutafchiev, *IBN* 1, chaps. IV–V; *IB* 2, pt. II, chaps. 1–2; Tzvetkov, 76, 95–106; I. Andreev, *Bŭlgarskite hanove i tsare, VII–XIV vek: Istoriko-bronologichen spravochnik* (Sofia, 1988), 8–28; Ts. Stepanov, *The Bulgars and the Steppe Empire in the Early Middle Ages: The Problem of the Others* (Leiden, 2010); P. Petrov, *Obrazuvane na bŭlgarskata dŭrzhava*; *IB* 5 VI, 73–78; V. Primov, “Bulgaria in the Eighth Century. A General Outline,” *Bb* 5 (Sofia, 1978), 7–40; id., “The Creation of the First Bulgarian State and European History,” *BHR* 1, no. 2 (1973): 37–51; Runciman, *A History*, 22–50; Browning, *Byzantium and Bulgaria*, chaps. 2, 5–10; Sophoulis, chaps. 2–4; Fine, *Early Medieval Balkans*, chaps. 2–3; Curta, *Southeastern Europe*, 81–90; Ostrogorsky, *History*, chaps. II–III.; Treadgold, *A History*, chaps. 9–12; id., *Byzantium and Its Army*, chaps. 1, 3, 6; Whittow, 270–276; R.J.H. Jenkins, *Byzantium: The Imperial Centuries, A.D. 610–1071* (London, 1966), chaps. 4–7; *NCMH* 2, R. McKitterick, ed. (Cambridge, 1995), 228–234; Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society*, chap. 2.

of human, material, and commercial resources that had bolstered the East Roman Empire for centuries past. In the Balkans, the raids of the Avars and their Slavic allies, coupled with a flood of Slavic settlement, had driven much of the native Roman population to the coasts or into the mountains in search of protection from the intruders' ravages. The majority of interior urban settlements were abandoned or shriveled to the size of villages while most of the countryside was controlled by *Sklaviniai* established by Slavic settlers. Only Thrace and some Balkan coastlines, with their fortified cities and access to the sea, remained under direct imperial authority. Compounding the empire's woes was the collapse of its army. Although the eastern forces were undergoing stopgap reorganization into themes behind the protection of Anatolia's southeastern mountains, the army in the Balkans had melted away before the Avar and Slav inundations.

There were faint signs of a silver lining in the empire's generally gloomy situation. The imperial fleet commanded the eastern Mediterranean, defeating an Arab blockade of Constantinople in 674–678, and providing naval protection for the population huddled along the Balkans' Adriatic and Aegean coasts. The majority of the inhabitants in the lands lost to the Arabs in the east were staunch Monophysite heretics who had plagued the empire's Christian administration for centuries. Their loss contributed to fashioning a more uniform imperial Orthodox religious ideology. The new theme-based military organization in Anatolia displayed signs of stabilizing the military and administrative situations in the region while the empire's Muslim Arab enemies were weakened by civil wars over the legitimate succession to the Islamic prophet-prince, Muhammad (622–632). In the Balkans, the Avar *kaganate* had slipped into decline following a failed assault on Constantinople in 626, leaving the Slavic *Sklaviniai* spread throughout the peninsula independent, disunited, and weakened. Given Byzantium's political, social, and cultural superiority, it appeared only a matter of time before the empire brought those primitive Slavic settlers under its authority and again exerted control over the imperial territories they inhabited.

Appearances regarding the Slavs in the Balkans proved deceiving, however, because the Bulgars arrived on the Danube in the late 670s.

Following the breakup of Great Bulgaria during the 660s under pressure from the Turkic Khazars, the Onogur Bulgars divided into five hordes, each led by a son of the deceased Great Bulgarian *han*,

Kubrat. One group remained in the homeland north of the Caucasus and fell under Khazar authority. Another fled north and settled near the confluence of the Volga and Kama rivers in present-day Russia, becoming known as the Volga Bulgars. The other three hordes were pushed westward by the Khazars, two of which entered Pannonia, some falling in with the Avars and others pushing into northeastern Italy before finally settling down. The largest group, constituting the Onogur Bulgars' main branch, was driven along the Black Sea coast until finding refuge in a naturally defended region, bordered by rivers and marshes, called the Onglos, north of the Danube in southern Moldavia in the 670s.

This last group was led by Asparuh (or Isperih), Kubrat's third son. He headed a horde of some 100,000 followers, 10,000 of whom were warriors. Taking advantage of the favorable terrain, Asparuh built a fortified camp to serve as a fortress and base for raiding expeditions.<sup>1</sup> In 679 his raiders crossed the Danube and began terrorizing the Slavic communities inhabiting Dobrudzha, which, similar to the adjoining Danubian Plain, was a region the Byzantine authorities considered imperial territory despite the lack of any formal administrative presence. When news of Bulgar inroads in Dobrudzha reached Emperor Constantine IV) (668–685), who had recently broken the Arab blockade of his capital and defeated a Slavic assault on Thessaloniki (July 677), he determined to expel the Bulgars from former imperial territory and reduce them to Byzantine client frontier buffer forces.

In summer 680 Constantine launched an attack against the Bulgars in the Onglos, entertaining high hopes of making short work of Asparuh's earthworks and imposing imperial suzerainty on the Bulgars. Unfortunately, poor staff work left him ill-prepared to tackle the natural obstacles protecting the Bulgar stronghold, and an unexpected drop in his army's morale led to ignominious defeat and retreat. Following the Byzantine debacle, the Bulgars overran Dobrudzha and the eastern Danubian Plain. Asparuh realized those lands offered more advantages than the featureless and sparsely populated steppes. They enjoyed natural borders defined by the Danube, the Balkan Mountains, and the Black Sea. Their open fields offered pasturage for his warriors' horses and were populated by Slavic communities, the Severi and the *Sklavinia* of the Seven Tribes. Asparuh spent a year consolidating his control over the two regions, subjugating or reducing to tributaries their Slavic inhabitants.

With Bulgar warriors beginning to raid Byzantine territories south of the Balkan Mountains, Emperor Constantine negotiated a peace agreement with Asparuh, freeing him to rebuild the thematic forces wrecked during the recent campaign. The treaty concluded in autumn 681 was the first in which the Byzantines officially relinquished former Balkan imperial lands by recognizing the existence of a foreign state controlling the peninsula's Dobrudzhan and lower Danubian territories. Asparuh also was granted annual tribute and ruled a Bulgar state stretching from the Dniester River on the steppes to the Balkan Mountains.

Having won official recognition from Byzantium, Asparuh organized his state's defenses and solidified his authority by placing a Bulgar governmental infrastructure into operation. The subject Slavs were transplanted *en masse* from their original homes on the plains to frontier regions for service as the state's border guards. The Seven Tribes were moved to face the Avar *kaganate* and the Severi were relocated to the eastern Balkan Mountains to guard the crucial mountain passes and Black Sea coastal road against future Byzantine threats. The Slavic tribes were permitted a measure of local autonomy under native *zhupani* so long as they paid tribute in kind and supplied military forces when required. Interior defensive positions were established behind the frontiers by erecting a series of earthworks.

The Slavic population transfers rendered the heartlands of the state—Dobrudzha and the eastern Danubian Plain—exclusive Bulgar preserves, settled and worked by Bulgars who soon became mixed pastoralists-agriculturalists. In the southeast, Asparuh erected Pliska, which later evolved into the state's capital. More a fortified encampment resembling those built for wintering on the steppes than a traditional European city, Pliska was surrounded by an extensive earthwork encompassing an area within which the entire Bulgar population and its animals could find refuge in times of need. At its center stood a similar but less extensive fortification enclosing a small area housing the *han's* residence and throne hall, religious structures, and the dwellings of high court officials and commanders. Although the segregation of Bulgars and Slavs eroded over time, for most of the eighth century Byzantine sources distinguished between Bulgars and Slavs when describing their enemy's military forces or population.<sup>2</sup>

Shortly after concluding the treaty Constantine IV introduced the theme system into the Balkans by establishing the theme of Thrace. Sometime in the 690s his son and successor Justinian II

(685–695; 705–711) founded the second Balkan theme of Hellas as a mixed naval and land theme.<sup>3</sup> Other than a chain of fortified port-cities along the Adriatic coast and their immediate hinterlands, by the end of the seventh century all Balkan territories lying outside the confines of those two themes were not imperial lands and were fair game for acquisition by the Bulgar outsiders.

To create his new Hellas theme, in 688 Justinian II moved against the *Sklaviniai* and a minor branch of Bulgars in Western Thrace and southern Macedonia. He advanced through Western Thrace to Thessaloniki, crushing all Bulgar and Slav resistance, collecting thousands of captives, and imposing imperial authority over the *Sklaviniai* in his path. After embarking his captives on ships bound for Bythinia, he marched out of Thessaloniki for Constantinople along the *Via Egnatia*, confident that the region's *Sklaviniai* were subdued, but he was ambushed and defeated in a southern Rhodope mountain pass by Bulgars and Slavs, barely escaping with his life.

Justinian II later played an active role in shaping Bulgar state history. In 695 he was deposed as emperor and exiled to Khazaria, where he was treated with honor and married a Khazar princess. After Byzantine agents persuaded the Khazar ruler to assassinate him in return for imperial favors, in late 704 Justinian fled by boat across the Black Sea to the Bulgar state, whose *han* was a recipient of annual imperial largess and thus considered a client by the Byzantines.

When Justinian arrived on Bulgar territory, Asparuh was dead and a new Dulo *han* ruled the Bulgar state—Tervel (700/701–721). Justinian offered him increased future tribute and gifts in return for military assistance in his regaining the imperial throne. In 705 Tervel gathered his army and advanced southward through Thrace to Constantinople, encountering little opposition because the region's thematic force was caught by surprise. Tervel and Justinian spent three days unsuccessfully attempting to gain entry to the city, but on the evening of the third night Justinian discovered an unguarded channel in the Aqueduct of Valens leading into the city. While Tervel's forces occupied the attention of the capital's defense forces, he crawled through the tunnel with a few followers, rallied additional supporters within the capital, seized control of the Blakhernai area with little difficulty, and caused confusion within the city. Emperor Tiberios Apsimar (698–705) fled and all resistance ended. After a decade of exile, Justinian again sat on Byzantium's imperial throne, thanks to the assistance provided by Han Tervel.

Justinian lavished Tervel with honors and gifts, proclaiming him caesar (Gr: *kaisar*), a title second only to that of emperor in prestige. An immense amount of money, weapons, and expensive silks was sent to the Bulgar camp.<sup>4</sup> The honors bestowed on Tervel by Justinian proved beneficial for consolidating the young Bulgar state. He was the first foreign ruler to receive the Byzantine title of caesar. The wealth granted him signified an increase in annual tribute paid him by Byzantium. His actions in 705 strengthened his state internally by further cementing his subjects' sense of loyalty to Bulgar central authority, increased foreign recognition of the state, and displayed to the Balkan *Sklaviniai* that the Bulgars offered a viable alternative to Byzantium regarding future affiliations.

The Bulgars' peaceful relations with Byzantium did not last long. In 708 Justinian, realizing that his Bulgar ally had emerged stronger and more dangerous as a result of 705, launched an attack on them but was routed outside Ankhialos. The victory assured Tervel's continued reception of large tribute payments and solidified the Bulgar state's standing as a regional Balkan power. The defeat contributed to Justinian's overthrow and death three years later (711).

Following his victory at Ankhialos, Tervel assumed a consistently threatening stance toward Byzantium. By 716 Theodosios III (715–717) sat unsteadily on the Byzantine throne. Faced with internal disorders and intensified warfare with the Arabs in Anatolia, Theodosios settled matters with the Bulgars in a treaty encompassing four main issues. First, a fixed border was drawn separating the two states. Second, the annual tribute paid the Bulgar *han* was increased in value. Third, a mutual exchange of captives, emigrants, and refugees was implemented. Last, trade between the two states was normalized and officially regulated.<sup>5</sup> After 35 years of official existence, the treaty demonstrated that the Bulgar state was evolving into a European power of note. Soon after its conclusion, events placed the Bulgars in the European international spotlight, cementing especially their military reputation.

While Tervel entrenched his state's position in the Balkans, developments within the Arab *khalifate* took a turn boding ill for Christian Europeans. In 711 North African Arab forces crossed the Strait of Gibraltar and began the conquest of the Iberian Peninsula, threatening the Frank state in the west. Meanwhile, Arab Syrian forces, commanded by Maslama, increased pressure against Byzantine Anatolia, contributing to instability within Byzantium's leadership. On both fronts, the Muslim



warriors were eager to continue advances against the Christians and Khalife Sulayman (715–717) was sympathetic and obliging. As a result, Christian Europe was caught between eastern and western pincers of militant Islam.

Sulayman ordered Maslama to advance against Constantinople. News of the assault spread rapidly, leading to the overthrow of Emperor Theodosios in spring 717 and his replacement by the *strategos* of the Anatolikon theme, Leo III the Syrian (717–741). Leo needed assistance to fend off the powerful Arab forces advancing on his capital by land and sea and turned to the only practical ally available, the neighboring Bulgar state. Tervel understood the danger posed for his realm should Byzantium be defeated and agreed to join forces with Leo.

The Arab siege of Constantinople began in summer 717 with an investment of the city by land and a naval blockade. From the beginning, the besiegers on land were forced to fight on two fronts, one against the Byzantines behind their impregnable land walls and the other against the Bulgars, who assailed them from Thrace. The Byzantine navy and the walls' defenders repulsed every attempt to breach the city's defenses by water and land while Tervel's men played havoc with Arab efforts to sortie or forage in the Thracian countryside. The siege dragged on through the severe winter of 717–718, with Maslama's efforts making little headway and his men suffering from the inordinate cold and widespread hunger caused by the Bulgars effective squelching of their foraging attempts. The end for Arab operations came in August 718 when Maslama made a last desperate attempt to break through the ring of Tervel's surrounding troops. The Arab assault was smashed and Tervel's men inflicted a terrible toll in casualties. With all hope of success gone, Maslama evacuated his remaining troops and the great siege of Constantinople ended. The surviving Arabs limped back across Anatolia to Syria while their fleet was destroyed by a storm on the Sea of Marmara.<sup>6</sup>

Fourteen years later, in 732 at Poitiers, the Franks under Charles Martel defeated a large armed raid into French territories by the Iberian Arabs, thus containing them south of the Pyrenees Mountains. Taken together, the two victories at Constantinople and Poitiers were viewed by contemporaries and later commentators as the most decisive events in early medieval European history. Because the attack on Constantinople was conducted by the forces of the *khalifate* itself, many in Europe held that, of the two, the victory at Constantinople was the more significant, in which the Bulgars had played a significant role. Tervel's effective

intervention as a Byzantine ally bestowed a level of international status on the Bulgar state that elevated it to a recognized European power.

Following the battles before Constantinople, little is known of the Bulgar state's internal developments from the 720s to the 750s because primary sources are scarce. This lack of sources renders any description of Bulgar affairs during the first half of the eighth century tentative.

The early Bulgar state seems to have been typically steppe nomadic in nature, ruled by an autocratic *han*, a title directly inherited from Western Turk rulers. Associations with the Western Turks also were apparent in the name of the ruling clan—Dulo—which had been that of a Western Turk leading family. Also typical was the Bulgars' political structure, which divided authority between inner and outer clans within the ruling elite and elevated all Bulgars above their Slavic tributaries, who participated in the state only as subjects. Further evidence linking the Balkan Bulgar state to Turkic cultural traditions was the nature of the Bulgars' primary settlement at Pliska, with its resemblance to a steppe encampment, and a Bulgar tradition of stone relief carvings and inscriptions found scattered throughout the eastern Danubian Plain.

There also is evidence for Byzantine cultural influences on the early Bulgar state. The Bulgar stone inscriptions were mostly written in Greek, using Greek characters rather than Turkic runes. Their content included names of Bulgars bearing Byzantine titles, Byzantine terminology, and the general use of Byzantine dating systems. This would indicate that the Bulgars made use of imperial models in political and administrative matters, that they maintained direct relations with the imperial court, and that they probably used members of their Romanized subjects as government functionaries from an early date.

Both the Turkic and Byzantine traditions worked together to shape a viable Bulgar state. The former provided an elite ruling warrior class dedicated to a strongly centralized, independent state ruled by an autocratic *han*. They upheld the ruler's authority, defended and expanded the state's borders, and ensured that the subject population remained loyal and provided what was required. In return, the ruler guaranteed them a dominant position within the state, their monopoly on all important military-administrative offices, and their well-being *vis-à-vis* their peers and inferior non-Bulgar subjects. The latter tradition imparted an ideal geared toward fashioning a sedentary, sophisticated state that could take advantage of skills—record keeping, court ceremonial, and bureaucratic talent—possessed by non-Bulgars as well as

Bulgars. The two traditions combined to forge a viable state in the true sense of the word.

The state's population was unevenly divided between Bulgars and non-Bulgars. The Bulgars constituted a minority and were concentrated on the right bank of the Danube throughout Dobruzha and the eastern Danubian Plain. They conducted a mixed pastoral and agricultural economy and probably undertook barter trade with imperial territories to the south. The Slavs were the state's majority population and consisted of sedentary agriculturalists living in villages concentrated on the state's borders, providing military recruits and paying tribute in kind to their Bulgar overlords. They existed in tribal groups led by native chiefs. The *Sklavinia* of the Seven Tribes enjoyed a confederative structure while other Slavic tribes, other than the Severi, were more nominal tributaries than outright subjects. Almost nothing is known regarding the existence of indigenous Thracians and Dacians, who inhabited the state's territories prior to the advent of the Slavs and Bulgars. Initially the Bulgars attempted to maintain their segregation from their Slavic subjects, but ethnic intermixing of the two peoples started at an early date.<sup>7</sup>

With the death of the last Dulo *han*, Sevar (738–753/754), in 753, the stability that had characterized the Bulgar state since its founding ended. Sevar's successor, Vineh (753/754–760), was a scion of the Vokil (or Ukil) clan and his successor was from another, after whom the succession again reverted to the Vokils. Such developments indicate that Bulgar central authority became hostage to clan rivalries with the extinction of the Dulos and remained so during the second half of the eighth century.

Divisiveness within the Bulgar leadership could not have occurred at a worse time. During the period of their state's consolidation, the Bulgars were free of significant Byzantine threats since Byzantium suffered its own stint of instability surrounding the imperial throne and was faced with Arab pressures from the east. That situation in Byzantium ended with the accession of Emperor Leo III and the Arab defeat at Constantinople, which led to the consolidation of imperial control over most of Anatolia and the dampening of the *khalifate's* threat from being potentially fatal to one primarily local. Leo enacted effective stabilizing legal reforms, but his parallel Orthodox church reform, known as Iconoclasm, was ideologically simplifying while emotionally divisive for the empire's subjects. The fact that the army, the most important institution upholding imperial stability and security, generally supported

Iconoclasm prevented the popular divisiveness from undermining central authority.<sup>8</sup>

Leo's son and successor Constantine V surpassed his father both as a military commander and an Iconoclast. After 14 years of successful military operations against the Arabs, those attributes of their leader became indelibly linked in the minds of most Byzantine troopers. The army's loyalty enabled Constantine to overcome coup attempts, restructure the theme organization to stifle *strategoi* rebellions, and create the corps of professional tagmatic units to serve as an elite strike force and counterweight to the militia-like provincial thematic forces. By the 750s, with affairs in Anatolia stabilizing, Constantine turned his attention to the Balkans and the Bulgars.

Constantine sought to rebuild the empire's demographic base in its Balkan holdings, thereby creating a strong defensive bastion against Bulgar threats and establishing a firm springboard for future expansion on the peninsula. In 755 he gathered colonists from Armenia and northern Syria for resettlement in Thrace, transferred them to the Balkans, and erected a series of fortresses along his border with the Bulgar state. Han Vineh interpreted those activities as a breach of the 716 treaty and demanded additional tribute in compensation. After Constantine insultingly dismissed the Bulgar request, Vineh turned to militarily addressing the situation. In late summer 755 he raided through Thrace, causing much destruction and capturing numerous prisoners. All went well until the raiders reached the Long Wall of Anastasios, where they were struck by Constantine leading his new tagmatic units in an effective counterattack. Vineh's lines broke and the Bulgars fled northward for the safety of the Balkan Mountains, suffering appalling casualties. So began the early Bulgar state's two-decade-long struggle for survival.

Beginning in the following year, Constantine initiated a concerted military effort to solidify Byzantium's presence in the Balkans by bringing the Bulgars to heel. He opened with a two-pronged assault on the Bulgar state in 756, dispatching a contingent of troops on ships to the mouth of the Danube for an amphibious operation against the Bulgars' Dobrudzhan heartland while he led another detachment overland against Vineh's main forces guarding the passes through the eastern Balkan Mountains. The campaign ended when Vineh was defeated outside the fortress of Markellai and forced to sue for peace.<sup>9</sup> Constantine followed that victory with a successful campaign of conquest against the southern Macedonian Slavs in 758, guaranteeing Byzantine control over the

northern Aegean coastline between Thrace and Thessaloniki. He then turned on Vineh and the Bulgars in 759 but his invasion force was caught, ambushed, and defeated in Rish (Gr: Veregava) Pass while traversing the Balkan Mountains.<sup>10</sup> Vineh failed to follow the Rish victory with offensive actions of his own and was overthrown as *han* by a *boil* uprising in 760. Telets (760–763) was installed as the new *han*.

To satisfy the militant ambitions of the warriors who raised him to the throne and to replenish his state's manpower with fresh captive subjects, Telets raided Byzantine northern Thrace, capturing inhabitants and laying waste a number of fortresses and villages. Constantine reacted in 763 by launching another combined land and amphibious operation, which brought Telets to battle near Ankhialos in June. After heavy fighting the Bulgars were routed. The numerous Bulgar captives from the battle later were executed in front of Constantinople's Golden Gate.<sup>11</sup> Telets was killed by his own *boili* soon after and replaced with Sabin (or Sivin; 763–766), who proved a weak and ineffective ruler.<sup>12</sup>

Constantine, aware of the divisions plaguing the Bulgar leadership, took the opportunity to definitively put the Bulgars in their place. He again resorted to his favorite grand tactical approach and organized a new combined land and sea operation aimed at striking the weakened state before it could stabilize. In 766 he led his tagmatic units and some Thracian *themata* overland to the foot of the Balkan Mountains and the Rish Pass while a large thematic force from Anatolia was dispatched by sea to north of Mesembria for an invasion of Bulgar territory. Before the disembarkation of the amphibious troops got much underway, a violent wind storm blew up, wrecking most of the ships. Thousands of men caught on the floundering vessels drowned. With the largest component of his combined operation destroyed, the emperor called off the offensive and returned to Constantinople.<sup>13</sup>

Sabin thought that the Byzantine debacle presented a good opportunity for renegotiating peace with the empire on favorable terms. Such overtures alienated many *boili*, who called a general assembly of Bulgar warriors, at which the opposition accused Sabin of pandering to the Byzantines to the detriment of the state. Matters quickly degenerated and the assembly was followed by rebellion. Sabin and most of his clan followers fled the state for Constantinople, seeking and winning Constantine's protection. His successor Umar (766) lasted on the throne a mere 40 days before being overthrown by the fractious clan leaders. A new *han*, Toktu (766–767), was proclaimed but he could not mend the

rifts splitting the Bulgar leadership. In 767 he was killed while combating invading Byzantine raiders in southern Dobrudzha.

Constantine maintained active pressure on the shaky Bulgar state after recovering from the failed campaign in 766. Pagan (767–768), the new Bulgar *han*, had his hands tied by continued infighting among the *boili*. Realizing that he needed to blunt imperial pressures on his state to end the leadership crisis and rebuild military morale, Pagan headed a delegation to Constantinople for negotiating a new treaty. When they met with Constantine in the capital, the former *han*, Sabin, appeared seated in the emperor's company. Before treaty discussions commenced, Pagan and the *boili* endured an insulting reprimand from Constantine for their ongoing disorderly actions and for the hatred they had displayed toward Sabin. Having dressed down the supplicant Bulgars, Constantine concluded with them a spurious new peace treaty (767/768).

The treaty was spurious because Constantine displayed no intention of abiding by its terms. While the talks were in progress, he had Slavun, *zhupan* of the Severi Slavs and loyal Bulgar commander, kidnapped and executed.<sup>14</sup> The Bulgar delegation had little recourse but to accept Slavun's loss and embrace the treaty dictated by Constantine, despite knowing their state was further weakened. Constantine did not waste time before striking. In 768 he led troops through the mostly unguarded passes in the eastern Balkan Mountains onto the southern Danubian Plain, where they burned a number of *auls* and villages, but were turned back by unexpectedly effective Bulgar resistance. Despite weathering the Byzantine invasion, Pagan did not long survive its conclusion. The *boili* held him responsible for the poorly guarded borders and rejected his reluctance to follow up the incursion's successful repulse. In attempting to flee the state for Byzantium, Pagan was murdered in Varna by his servants.<sup>15</sup>

With the acquisition of the Bulgar throne by Telerig (768–777), the internecine clan strife among the state's leadership dampened in degree. Within six years the new *han* reined in the *boil* conflicts and attained a measure of internal stability, granting the Bulgar state a short period to lick its wounds. Between 768 and 774 Emperor Constantine was pre-occupied with domestic matters surrounding Iconoclasm and renewed Arab problems in Anatolia. The period of internal consolidation and calm under Telerig stood the Bulgar state in good stead when the emperor again turned his attention to the Balkans in 774.

Constantine sought to achieve an easy victory over the weakened Bulgar state to bolster his domestic position and military reputation after some tarnishing defeats in the east. Resorting to the combined land and sea operations often used in past campaigns, in May 774 he dispatched his thematic cavalry forces by land against the eastern Balkan Mountain passes while he sailed for the mouth of the Danube with the rest of his troops. When Constantine reached Varna, he was met by a delegation from Telerig requesting a peaceful settlement before actual fighting erupted. For reasons unknown, the emperor complied and a treaty was struck in which both sides renounced further offensive undertakings.<sup>16</sup>

With the Byzantine menace momentarily dampened, Telerig turned to replenishing his subject population after the years of warfare with Byzantium. In October 774 he dispatched a force of 12,000 warriors to the region of Berzitia, somewhere in northeastern Macedonia, with orders to subjugate the territory and transfer its Slavic population to locations inside the state. Constantine learned of the plan from “secret friends” among the Bulgar *boili*. He gathered a large force and marched rapidly to Berzitia, intent on preventing the Bulgars from replenishing their numbers and extending their influence into Macedonia. The forces met at Lithosoria and the Byzantines achieved complete tactical surprise, routing the Bulgars while suffering few casualties. Constantine returned to Constantinople and celebrated a triumph commemorating his victory in what became known in Byzantium as the “Noble War.”<sup>17</sup>

Constantine considered Telerig’s activities in Berzitia a breach of the Varna accord and in the following year (775) organized a new combined land and sea operation against him. Misfortune struck the expedition as the fleet was wrecked by a storm on approaching Mesembria, leading Constantine to cancel the operation. Telerig then demonstrated that he had learned the wiles of Byzantine diplomacy. Convinced Constantine was being furnished intelligence by informants among his *boili*, and aware that the emperor relished hosting royal refugees for diplomatic use, Telerig contacted Constantine feigning a wish to flee to the empire and asking for imperial protection. He included a request for the names of the emperor’s “friends” in Pliska who could help in the matter. Constantine duly forwarded Telerig a list of his confidants at the Bulgar court. That list constituted a death warrant for Byzantine informants in Pliska.<sup>18</sup>

Enraged at the Bulgar *han*’s duplicity, Constantine organized a campaign to avenge Telerig’s affront to imperial dignity. In August 775 he

led his troops northward but, before they advanced far into Thrace, the emperor was struck down by a high fever and died. His death was greeted with joy among the Bulgars but, for Telerig, the euphoria swiftly changed to dread. Although nothing factual is known, reemerging strife within the highest circles of the Bulgar governing elite led Telerig to do what previously he had only feigned. In 777 he fled the state for the empire fearing for his life. The new emperor, Leo IV (775–780), received and took a liking to him. Telerig soon embraced Christianity, married a cousin of Leo's empress, and joined the Byzantine patrician elite.

Emperor Constantine V's death and the acquisition of the Bulgar throne by Telerig's successor Kardam (777–803) heralded the end of the Bulgar state's eighth-century struggle for survival. Each of those events terminated an important facet of that strife. The emperor's death closed the potentially fatal foreign military threat from Byzantium while Kardam's reign resulted in dampening the equally threatening problem of endemic clan divisiveness within the Bulgar leadership by tentatively cementing the *han's* supreme authority. Certain scholarly hypotheses have arisen regarding the nature of both threats.

Constantine V's struggles with the Bulgar state have frequently been characterized as conscious efforts to annihilate the Bulgar state by an emperor fixated on its destruction. Whether his military intention was Bulgar obliteration, however, can be questioned. In every successful campaign, he never attempted to deliver an utterly decisive blow by destroying the defeated, often shattered, Bulgar forces. Nor did he attempt to capture Pliska, the Bulgars' capital, which would have forced the total surrender of the Bulgar government. He kept his military operations confined within localized bounds. The objectives of those campaigns that failed cannot be assumed to have been total Bulgar destruction, given the outcomes of those that succeeded. In all peace negotiations, he explicitly recognized the continued existence of the Bulgar state. It appears he was more concerned with protecting and increasing the population of imperial territories—with his fortress building, population transfers, southern Macedonian conquests, and prevention of Bulgar expansion—than with annihilating the Bulgar state. That the Bulgars came close to collapsing under the military pressures of his campaigns speaks more about Bulgar inability to withstand the full military might of an enemy undistracted by concerns in the east than about intractable anti-Bulgar motivations on Constantine's part.<sup>19</sup>



Regarding the internal threat to Bulgar state existence, the lack of sources treating Bulgar domestic affairs renders the actual causes and social-political dimensions of the divisiveness indiscernible. This factual vacuum has been filled by interpretive hypotheses, two of which enjoy popularity among scholars.

One hypothesis emphasizes domestic issues and assumes ethnic antagonisms between Bulgars and Slavs over dominance within the state lay at the heart of the crisis. In this case, a pro-Bulgar leadership party sought to preserve political dominance and held an unbridled antagonism toward the Byzantines. A pro-Slav opposition party fought to expand Slavic representation in governing circles and looked to Byzantium for assistance. The other premise focuses on foreign policy matters and supposedly stemmed from conflicting pro- and anti-Byzantine policies within the ruling elite. The former party favored peaceful relations with Byzantium to stifle threats by the empire and were sympathetic to Byzantine cultural influences. The latter party considered their domestic opponents traitors and held that only complete political and cultural independence, upheld by constant vigilance and military efforts, was acceptable. The anti-Byzantine party emphasized self-defense and active resistance to Byzantium. Because the Slavs served as the state's first line of frontier defenders and were in daily contact with Byzantine border forces, they formed an important component of this latter party.<sup>20</sup>

Both of the above postulates are contradictory and seemingly confuted by the few facts found in the sources. The Slavic party could not have been both pro-Byzantine, according to the ethnic perspective, but anti-Byzantine within the foreign policy approach. Since both Sabin and his replacement Pagan sought peace with Byzantium, they should have belonged to the same pro-Byzantine party, but the meeting with Constantine V in Constantinople (767/768) made it clear they were not. Both of these traditional hypotheses should be viewed with a large dose of critical doubt. They may provide insight into what actually occurred but, just as likely, other factors were as, or more, important.

Perhaps having to face the full military might of Byzantium for the first time since entering the Balkans resulted in military disasters that shook the confidence of the Bulgar leadership. With no traditional dynastic clan enjoying unquestioned loyalty once the Dulos died out, any clan could stake its claim to the royal legacy, resulting in bloody coups, shifting clan alliances, and the refusal of some clans to accept the authority of others. Maybe unknown affairs with the Avars or Khazars

contributed to dividing priorities within Bulgar ruling circles. Add to this possible mix the presence of Byzantine agents and sympathizers and the varying military and political capabilities of those who became *han*, and it grows obvious that the eighth-century domestic political crisis probably was multi-faceted, extending beyond the two standard theories noted above. Fortunately for the state, the divisiveness was generally confined to the top leadership while the majority of warriors remained largely unaffected by the rifts, retaining their loyalty to political traditions and their determination to remain independent from the empire. The warriors' steadfastness provided the foundation for stabilizing the internal political situation by century's end.<sup>21</sup>

Although the details are unknown, the new *han*, Kardam, ended the divisiveness within the clan leadership in some fashion and consolidated the supreme power of the *han's* office, becoming the first Bulgar ruler since Sevar to remain in power until suffering a natural death. Emperor Leo IV was succeeded by the youth Constantine VI (780–797) and his mother-regent Eirene (797–802). Problems with the Arabs in the east monopolized those rulers' attention for another five years, granting Kardam a period of peace and the freedom to concentrate solely on domestic matters, which helps account for his success in addressing his state's domestic problems.

Kardam's cures for the internal political crisis were first tested in 784 when Empress-regent Eirene conducted a triumphal-like tour through the empire's Thracian borderlands fronting the Bulgar state, regions that the empress had recently repopulated with colonists from the east. At the head of a large military force, Eirene wended her way to Beroia (m: Stara Zagora) and had the town fortified. The walls of Ankhialos were repaired and an imperial visit to Philippopolis was made before she returned to the capital. Kardam patiently bided his time, unwilling to precipitate a major conflict with Byzantium at the time. He instead sent troops into northeastern Macedonia, to the upper Struma River region, in hopes of winning authority over the local Slavic inhabitants and strengthening the Bulgars' position against possible renewed imperial threats.<sup>22</sup>

In 789 a Byzantine thematic raiding force led by the *strategos* of Thrace, Philetos, advanced up the Struma valley into northern Macedonian regions infiltrated by the Bulgars. His camp was overrun by Bulgar-Slav forces and he was killed. Soon after that defeat, Empress Eirene created the theme of Macedonia, which encompassed Western

Thrace and parts of Thrace proper and lay to the east of geographic Macedonia, to consolidate control over the northern Aegean coastal regions and prevent Bulgar raiders from reaching farther south.<sup>23</sup>

In the following year, at the age of 19, Constantine VI removed his mother from power temporarily and claimed undivided possession of the imperial throne. By spring 791 he felt able to avenge the Struma defeat by undertaking his first independent military campaign against the Bulgars. He led his troops into Thrace as far as the fortress of Probaton (m: Sinnaköy), northeast of Adrianople. Nearby, Kardam and his warriors met the emperor in the late afternoon and a serious skirmish ensued until nightfall ended the combat. The inexperienced Constantine withdrew his troops without expanding the fighting into a full-blown battle and Kardam, content with the Byzantine retreat, pulled back behind his border.<sup>24</sup>

Two years later Constantine again moved against the Bulgars, who had recently begun raiding northern Thrace while he had been occupied in the east. In summer 792 Constantine marched a large army, many of whose troopers had no experience fighting the Bulgars, north to Markellai, where he made camp and began repairing the walls of the fortress, which had been damaged in the recent Bulgar raiding. Kardam collected his own large force, now well trained and eager for a fight after a decade of peace, and took up a fortified position on the mountain slopes north of Markellai. On 20 July Constantine recklessly attacked the waiting Bulgars and suffered a disastrous defeat. Kardam's men overran the Byzantine camp, capturing a large amount of prisoners and booty, including the emperor's tent and all its contents.<sup>25</sup>

Following the battle Kardam spent four more years consolidating his authority at home, bolstered by his victory at Markellai. At the same time, Constantine was preoccupied with his own domestic troubles surrounding his powerful mother and discontented military commanders and government officials. To secure peace with the Bulgars while he dealt with his problems, he agreed to pay Kardam annual tribute. In 796 Kardam sent a haughty message to the emperor demanding increased tribute under the threat of devastating Thrace and marching to Constantinople's Golden Gate. Although he was a weak and incompetent ruler, Constantine did not lack panache. He sent the Bulgar *han* a package of horse dung as tribute and a challenge to meet him in battle. The two hosts met in Thrace near the fortress of Versinikia, northeast of Adrianople. Displaying new found discretion, Constantine refused to

initiate battle. Kardam, for his part, was in no rush to commence hostilities. The two armies sat in place watching one another for 17 days until Kardam, unwilling to risk the possibility of outright defeat, withdrew northward and retrenched behind his border. Constantine, following Kardam's lead, also retired, dispatching his troops to their respective themes. Active military operations petered out, with the Byzantines winning a victory of sorts since Thrace was not devastated and Constantine stopped tribute payments to the Bulgar ruler.<sup>26</sup>

With the fizzling out of that campaign, the Bulgar state was granted another decade of peace by Byzantium, during which Kardam's efforts to consolidate central political authority apparently took root. He demonstrated that a strong ruler resulted in a strong military, and that a strong military prevented the danger of a fatal Byzantine threat. Although he did not decisively defeat the empire, he bested it, and by doing so made it clear that the days of Constantine V were over. Byzantium could no longer deal the Bulgar state continuous, life-threatening blows at will. The Bulgars had weathered the internal and military crises of the second half of the eighth century and, having survived, stood poised for the rise to empire that followed.

## NOTES

1. R. Rashev, "L'Onglos—témoignages écrit et faits archéologiques," *BHR* 10, no. 1 (1982): 68–79.
2. Zlatarski, *IBDSV* 1/1, 198f; Mutafchiev, *IBN* 1, 95f; Runciman, *A History*, 27f; Fine, *Early Medieval Balkans*, 67f.
3. C. Head, *Justinian II of Byzantium* (Madison, WI, 1972), 83.
4. Suidas, *Lexicon*, entry "Bulgars," given in *Voices*, 23.
5. Theophanes, 681.
6. *Ibid.*, 545–546; Zonaras, 158; the *Synaxarion of the Constantinople Church* in *BVIpid* 1, D. Angelov, comp. and ed. (Sofia, 1977), 95–96; Michael the Syrian, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien, patriarche jacobite d'Antioche (1166–1199)* 2, J.-B. Chabot, trans. and ed. (Paris, 1901), 485; V. Gyuzelev, "La participation des bulgares à l'échec du siège arabe de Constantinople en 717–718," *EH* 10 (Sofia, 1980): 91–113; B. Primov, "Za ikonicheskata i politicheska rolya na pŭrvata bŭlgarska dŭrzhava v mezhdunarodnite odnosheniya na srednovekovna Evropa," *IPr*, no. 2 (1961): 55–57; E.W. Brooks, "The Campaigns of 716–718 from Arabic Sources," *JHS* 19 (1899): 19–33; P. Yannopoulos, "Le rôle

- des bulgares dans la guerre Arabo-Byzantine de 717/718,” *Byzantion* 67 (1997): 483–516.
7. Angelov, *Obrazuvane*, pt. 3, chap. 2; Sophoulis, chaps. 2.2.1–2.2.2; Whittow, 271f; Browning, *Byzantium and Bulgaria*, 47–48, 123–130.
  8. L. Brubaker and J. Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era, c. 680–850: A History* (Cambridge, 2011); W.E. Kaegi, “The Byzantine Armies and Iconoclasm,” *Bs* 27 (1966): 48–70.
  9. Iv. Duichev, *Prouchvaniya vŭrhu bŭlgarskoto srednovekovie* (Sofia, 1943), 19.
  10. For Bulgarian defenses in the Rish Pass, see I. Georgiev, “Voenni pŭtishata i predgradni stiorŭzheniya v Rishkiya prohod,” *VISb*, no. 2 (1993): 5–23.
  11. M. McCormick, *Eternal Victory: Triumphal Rulership in Late Antiquity, Byzantium and the Early Medieval West* (Cambridge, 1986), 135–136.
  12. Stepanov, *Vlast i avtoritet*, 141–143.
  13. Our study follows the chronology for these events given in *IB* 2.
  14. Theophanes, 603.
  15. *Ibid.*; Nik. Pat., 152–153.
  16. Theophanes, 616–617; Zonaras, 160.
  17. Theophanes, 617.
  18. *Ibid.*, 618; Zonaras, 160–161.
  19. *NCMH* 2, 232–233.
  20. For the ethnic approach regarding the internal crisis, see Zlatarski, *IBDSV* 1/1, 274–281. For the pro/anti-Byzantine approach, see Mutafchiev, *IBN* 1, 122–123.
  21. Sophoulis, 94; *NCMH* 2, 233.
  22. Zonaras, 161.
  23. Sophoulis, 165–166, dated events to 788.
  24. W. Treadgold, *The Byzantine Revival, 780–842* (Stanford, CA, 1988), 91–92, 98.
  25. Theophanes, 643; D. Momchilov, “Srednovekovniyat grad Markeli (Obzor po arheologicheski dannii),” in *Pŭtuvaniyata v srednovekovna Bŭlgariya* (Veliko Tŭrnovo, 2009), 201 (for the damaged fortress walls).
  26. Theophanes, 646; Sophoulis, 169–171.

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## Krum's Campaigns of Expansion, 809–814

Having survived the crippling divisiveness within its leadership and the near-fatal military defeats inflicted by Emperor Constantine V during the second half of the eighth century, the Bulgar state faced another challenge posed by Byzantium at the turn of the new century. Commencing with the joint reign of Empress Eirene and Emperor Constantine VI in the 780s and continuing under Emperor Nikephoros I (802–811), Byzantium undertook an effort to subjugate the various *Sklaviniai* located in Western Thrace, Macedonia, and Greece and bring those regions under imperial control. Success would strengthen the empire militarily and financially and prevent the Bulgar state from doing the same. Thus, the Bulgars would be confined to Dobrudzha and the Danubian Plain and rendered more susceptible to future military efforts to eliminate their state altogether, and imperial authority over all previously lost Balkan lands would be restored.

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The following works provided the basic informational framework for the text of this chapter on Krum: Bozhilov and Gyuzelev, pt. 2, chap. 6; Zlatarski, *IBDSV* 1/1, 321–376; Mutafchiev, *IBN* 1, chap. VI, sect. 1; *IB* 2, pt. II, chap. 3, sect. 1–3; *IB* 5 VI, 78–87; Sophoulis, chaps. 5–6; Runciman, *A History*, 50–74; Browning, *Byzantium and Bulgaria*, 49–51; Tzvetkov, 108–113; Andreev, 29–37; Fine, *Early Medieval Balkans*, 78–83, 94–106; Curta, *Southeastern Europe*, 147–156; Treadgold, *A History*, chap. 13; id., *Byzantine Revival*, chaps. Three and Four; Ostrogorsky, *History*, chap. III., section 6–7; Whittow, 276–279; Luttwak, 176–185; Jenkins, *Imperial Centuries*, chap. 9; *NCMH* 2, 233–236.

Efforts were made to subdue the Slavs of Western Thrace and southern Macedonia by Justinian II and Constantine V but had proved only temporarily successful. Empress Eirene continued the process by targeting the *Sklaviniai* of Macedonia and Greece, areas well away from the Bulgar frontier, in hopes of winning easy military victories for propaganda purposes in the capital. In 782 she dispatched the eunuch general Stavrakios on an extended raid against the *Sklaviniai*. He attacked the Slavs near Thessaloniki, marched southward through Thessaly, winning victories against weak Slavic opposition, and raided into the Slav-held Peloponnese. Little of concrete value was won, but the imperial triumph accorded Stavrakios in the capital presaged the emphasis that the authorities soon placed on regaining the Greek southern Balkans and more northerly Macedonia. This latter aim was emphasized with the creation of a third Balkan theme of Macedonia, carved out of the two existing themes of Thrace and Hellas and centered on Western Thrace, with its commander stationed at Adrianople. Although none of territorial Macedonia formed part of the theme, its title reflected Byzantium's future goal in the region. To safeguard against Bulgar threats to her expansionary policy in the southern Balkans, Eirene conducted her "tour" of northern Thrace in 784, constructing or restoring a string of fortresses—Ankhialos, Markellai, Beroia, and Philippopolis—to protect the imperial border with the Bulgar state and to intimidate the Bulgars.<sup>1</sup>

Bulgar Han Kardam attempted to counter Byzantium's gradual move toward Macedonia by sending troops into the region hoping to gain clients among the local *Sklaviniai*. While the efforts made by both sides to secure Macedonia's Struma River valley resulted in the Bulgars' defeat of a Byzantine thematic force in 789, little further is known about the regional struggle until the first decade of the ninth century. By that time a coup in 802 had removed Eirene and Constantine from the imperial throne and elevated Nikephoros I, a former court official.<sup>2</sup>

Nikephoros sought to accelerate the expansion of imperial presence in Greece and Macedonia to counteract growing discontent caused by his continuation of Eirene's anti-Iconoclast domestic policy, coupled with military setbacks inflicted by the Arabs in the east. On his orders in 805, 2000 imperial troops operating out of Corinth easily extended Byzantine authority over the Peloponnese, forcing the regional Slavs into submission. The city of Patras was recovered and rebuilt. All of the newly recovered lands in the peninsula were repopulated by Greek-speaking descendants of Romans native to the region who had fled either

to imperial Italian lands or to the eastern Peloponnesian coastline to escape the seventh-century Avar-Slav onslaughts. Their resettlement in large numbers pressured the resident Slavs to assimilate into the empire's Hellenic culture, sparking an ultimately unsuccessful Slavic uprising in 807. Additional assurance for successfully Hellenizing the Slavs in Greece was the imposition, beginning in 809, of an exclusively Greek-speaking Orthodox church organization, which conducted an intensive campaign of Slavic religious conversions. Aided by the church, the new Greek-speaking colonists absorbed and dominated their Slavic neighbors. In less than a century following Nikephoros's efforts, Greece once again was predominantly Greek.<sup>3</sup>

The ease with which the Peloponnesian Slavs were subdued convinced Nikephoros that a larger, more coordinated effort, combining military force with population resettlement and the imposition of an Orthodox church organization, could bring Western Thrace and geographical Macedonia under imperial control, thus linking the empire's Adriatic coastal possessions in Dalmatia directly to Constantinople by way of the *Via Egnatia*. Between 807 and 809 Nikephoros made efforts to facilitate his Balkan project whenever domestic matters and affairs with the Arabs permitted. He instituted unpopular census and expanded tax reforms to determine where within the imperial Anatolian population colonists for resettlement to the Balkans could safely be obtained and to increase funding for an enlarged army. He reinforced the thematic forces of Macedonia and Hellas to a strength of 12,000 men by transferring troops from Anatolia and by recruitment among the new settlers in Greece, and those forces soon exerted control over most of the Struma River valley. He signed a disadvantageous and unpopular peace treaty with the Arabs in 807 to free his hands for concentrating on the Balkans. Finally, he resettled Serdika and reconstructed its defense walls, thereby extending the string of northern fortresses facing the Bulgars 97 miles (156 km) farther west than Philippopolis to guard the most direct access to Macedonia and the Struma valley through the Sofia Basin against the Bulgars north of the Balkan Mountains.<sup>4</sup>

Nikephoros could initiate his moves into Struma Macedonia and the Sofia Basin because he knew that the Danubian Bulgars were preoccupied at the time with matters transpiring to their northwest in Pannonia. Events in Pannonia affecting the Bulgars resulted from the Avar state's collapse at the hands of Charlemagne's Franks. The Frank ruler's involvement with the Avars grew directly out of his conquest of Bavaria



in 787. His new possession bordered on the western-most stretches of the Avar *kaganate*, which had terrorized Western Europeans for centuries. The temptation to win acclaim as the Avars' conqueror proved irresistible to Charlemagne, who assembled a large military force to pummel them. In 791 he advanced into the western regions of the *kaganate* and penetrated as far eastward as the confluence of the Danube and Raab (or Raba) rivers. The western Avars mounted little resistance to the Frank onslaught, having grown more sedentary and less warlike than their relatives facing the Bulgars in the southeastern portions of the *kaganate*. Despite the weak resistance, it required seven years, three campaigns, led after the initial invasion by Charlemagne's son Pepin, and the assistance of Croat Slavic client allies before the Avar state west of the Tisza River collapsed. Pepin destroyed the Avars' "(H)Ring"—their walled citadel—in 796 and captured the treasures stored within, providing Charlemagne with a vast amount of wealth that endowed him with the wherewithal to cement his position of political superiority in Western Europe.<sup>5</sup>

As fleeing western Avars flooded into Pannonia east of the Tisza, their non-Avar client peoples broke with the floundering state. The assorted Bulgars in eastern Pannonia and the Srem region of the *kaganate* rose and turned on the reeling Avars, probably assisted by raiders from Kardam's Bulgar state who quickly seized the situation's opportunities. The refugees from the *kaganate's* western regions were no match for either the insurgent Pannonian Bulgars, who had retained their steppe warrior lifestyle, or the more organized Danubian Bulgars. Sometime between 796 and 805 they were annihilated by the Bulgar warriors while the more warlike southeastern Avars were reduced to Bulgar clientage. The victors are thought to have gained possession of southern Pannonia east of the Tisza River, as well as parts of southern Transylvania, and the Bulgar state acquired an injection of new Bulgar warriors. The lower Tisza became the common border between the Frank kingdom and the newly expanded Bulgar state, which Charlemagne decided was no threat to his eastern-most acquisitions and therefore left in peace.<sup>6</sup>

Some scholars claim that the leader of the Bulgars operating against the disintegrating Avars was a charismatic individual named Krum, who became one of the great rulers of the early medieval Bulgar state (803–814) by initiating its progressive rise to empire in competition with Byzantium. His name later came to strike fear in the hearts of the Byzantines, but despite his earned historical notoriety, Krum's origins and the circumstances surrounding his elevation to *han* in the Bulgar

state remain matters of speculation because extant primary sources treating those matters are lacking<sup>7</sup> (Fig. 3.1).

There are three plausible hypotheses regarding Krum's origins. One is that he was one of many chieftains among the Avars' client Bulgars who won a large and tribally heterogeneous following and the loyalty of the other Bulgar chiefs because of his recognized superior leadership, military talents, and forceful personality. When he gained the throne of the Bulgar state, he founded a new Bulgar ruling dynasty.<sup>8</sup> The second is that Krum was a scion of the old Bulgar Dulo ruling clan who traced his ancestry back to Kubrat of Great Bulgaria. In this scenario, Krum was both a Pannonian Onogur Bulgar, and therefore related to his "cousins" in the Danubian Bulgar state, and the only surviving member of those Bulgars' legitimate ruling dynasty.<sup>9</sup> The third theory is that Krum, of unknown clan origin, emerged as the state's leader from among the Danubian Bulgars fighting the Avars and never was a Pannonian Bulgar, despite the high probability that many Pannonian Bulgars involved in the Avar collapse had entered the Danubian Bulgar state.<sup>10</sup>

Regarding how and when Krum became ruler of the Bulgar state, there also exist three leading hypothetical reconstructions. One possibility is that Krum and his Pannonian Bulgar following were pushed eastward as part of the Avars' displacement until they entered territories of the Bulgar state, perhaps western Wallachia. Once within the Bulgar state, the longstanding clan divisiveness surrounding the succession to the throne that may have reemerged with Kardam's death in 802 or 803 provided Krum with the opportunity to attain that position either by force, by forceful persuasion of the Danubian *boili*, or by claiming it in the name of rightful Dulo legitimacy. However he managed to gain the throne, Krum soon after invaded the eastern Pannonian regions of the shattered Avar *kaganate* with all of the state's military forces and defeated the Avars by 805.<sup>11</sup> The surviving Slavic and Avar tribes in the eastern regions of the former *kaganate* were reduced to Bulgar clients and eastern Pannonia, as far west as the Tisza River, and Transylvania, as far north as the northern slopes of the Carpathian Mountains, were incorporated into the *hanate's* holdings, almost doubling the state's territory and creating new northwestern and northern state borders stretching from the Tisza to the Dniester rivers.<sup>12</sup>

The second posited chronology is that Krum and his Pannonian Bulgar followers destroyed the remnants of the Avar *kaganate* sometime between 796 and 803, establishing a Pannonian Bulgar state entity in



Fig. 3.1 Campaigns of Han Krum, 809–814

eastern Pannonia and Transylvania bordering on both the Frank kingdom and the Danubian Bulgar state, and bringing assorted Slavic and Avar groups in those regions under Krum's authority. Some scholars suggest that the Danubian Bulgars had long kept in touch with the Pannonian Bulgars in the Avar *kaganate*.<sup>13</sup> When word of Han Kardam's death reached Krum, now an independent Bulgar ruler in his own right,

he probably realized that succession problems might arise and moved to take advantage of the situation. He made efforts to acquire the throne of the larger and more prestigious Bulgar state, perhaps playing on his Onogur and Dulo personal credentials and his recent military victories to win over the *hanate's boili* or perhaps simply using the threat of brute force backed by common knowledge of his obliteration of the Avars. He succeeded, bringing those territories and populations in Pannonia and Transylvania that he already controlled with him to the Bulgar state.<sup>14</sup>

The third conjectural reconstruction regarding Krum attaining the Bulgar throne is that the Avar *kaganate's* collapse contributed to ending Danubian Bulgar clan infighting by opening to the Bulgar warriors enticing opportunities for fighting, plunder, and territorial expansion in southern Pannonia, and that Krum played an active leadership role in those activities. Through his exceptional and successful military leadership abilities, charismatic personality, and the development of an effective system mixing patronage with intimidation, he managed to forge broad-based support among the Bulgar *boili* for his rule as Kardam's successor. Krum's effective raiding into former Avar territories brought the Danubian Bulgar state increased tribute from cowed Avar and Slav tribes residing in southern Pannonia and Transylvania, but did not result in his outright conquests of those territories.<sup>15</sup>

Krum sat on the Bulgar *hanate's* throne in Pliska by 807. In that year Emperor Nikephoros I began accelerating his plans for solidifying imperial control of the southern Balkans, convinced that the Bulgars remained preoccupied with matters in the Avar *kaganate* and satisfied that adequate defenses were in place against Arab incursions in the east after forging with them a distasteful peace. To ensure that the Bulgars, who had opened renewed raiding of Byzantine northern Thrace, posed no problems for his consolidation projects in Greece and Macedonia, Nikephoros decided to lead a preemptive attack on the Bulgars' state hoping to intimidate them and forestall any disruptive intervention on their part.

In spring 807 Nikephoros mobilized and reinforced the Macedonian and Thracian thematic armies and set out from Constantinople at the head of his tagmatic troops to join them in the field for an invasion of Bulgar territory. He never advanced farther than Adrianople, where he learned of a conspiracy against him among some tagmatic junior officers, many of whom hailed from the his home region in Anatolia. The rebellious commanders were disgruntled over Arab depredations in their

homeland during the previous year and Nikephoros's seeming acceptance of those actions in the humiliating peace agreement. That they were campaigning against the Bulgars and not the Arabs was both incomprehensible and unacceptable to them. Having uncovered the conspiracy, Nikephoros terminated offensive operations and returned to his capital, where the imprisoned conspirators were punished by floggings, confiscations of property, and in some cases exile. Although the reinforced Macedonian thematic army remained mobilized and may later have made advances against *Sklaviniiai* in southern and eastern Macedonia, the 807 campaign against the Bulgars ended before it started.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the aborted campaign and shortly thereafter being forced to turn his attention to Arab incursions in Anatolia, Nikephoros continued efforts at imperial expansion in Greece and Macedonia. The reinforced Hellas thematic army imposed imperial control over most of the Greek Peninsula while the similarly reinforced Macedonian thematic force secured nearly the entire length of the Struma River valley. A short distance to the northeast, elements of the expanded thematic army advanced into the Sofia Basin, where they resurrected the defense walls of Serdika and established there a large garrison. Nikephoros dispatched colonists to resettle the fortress-city. The additional colonists needed to populate rejuvenated Serdika and those areas of Western Thrace and eastern Macedonia now under imperial control were provided by elements from the Anatolian population who were not listed in existing tax registers and were shipped to the newly acquired territories throughout 808.<sup>17</sup>

Nothing is known of events transpiring within the Bulgar state while Nikephoros conducted his still-born campaign and subsequent expansionary activities in Macedonia and the Sofia Basin. No doubt Krum's court was apprised of the campaign's anti-Bulgar objective and kept informed about Byzantine moves to Serdika and up the Struma valley. Whether affairs in Pannonia or in Pliska prevented any immediate response to Nikephoros's endeavors cannot be determined. Krum simply may have bided his time before taking forceful counteraction while assessing the nature and extent of the Byzantine threat to his state and ensuring that adequate military strength was available for counter measures.

Krum apparently understood that the most immediate danger posed by Byzantium lay not in Thrace, as traditionally had been the case, but in the Sofia Basin and the Struma valley of eastern Macedonia. From those

regions Byzantium could cut the Bulgars off from further westward and southward expansion in the Balkans. The Bulgars would then find themselves territorially and demographically confined between the Byzantines to their south, the Franks to their west, and the Khazars and other steppe peoples to their east. Reduced to such a situation, they ultimately would lie at the mercy of any of those potential enemies, but most especially of the Byzantines.

Sometime in early 809 Krum moved against the encroaching imperial forces in the Struma River valley and the Sofia Basin with all of his available warriors.<sup>18</sup> In March they crossed the Balkan Mountains and entered the basin. A detached force invested Serdika while Krum led the rest over the Vladya Pass separating the Lyulin Mountains from Mount Vitosha, through the broken hill country surrounding the Struma's headwaters, and southward down that river's upper valley. His objective was the reinforced Macedonian thematic force encamped somewhere in the valley to the south, possibly near the confluence of the Dzherman River with the Struma, where it would be within supporting distance of Serdika.<sup>19</sup>

The imperial force gathered in the valley had spent two years securing control of the region in the face of scant opposition from the resident Strumyani (or Strumtsi) Slavs. It was a large army, under the command of the Macedonian thematic *strategos*, composed of that theme's troops but heavily reinforced by contingents from the other Balkan themes as well as some Anatolian units. The force apparently totaled some 12,000 men, mustered together to receive their tri-annual pay from the 1100 pounds of gold recently shipped from Constantinople to the thematic commander for that purpose.<sup>20</sup> Because there had been so little resistance from the local Slavs, camp security was lax as the *strategos* began the process of distributing pay to his men.

Krum must have known about the arrival of the Byzantine payroll and understood that the troops would be off their guard while awaiting its distribution. Instead of advancing headlong down the middle of the valley, where his presence would have been revealed, Krum made clandestine use of secondary mountain roads and paths, known only to the local Slavs, to place his force in hiding on the valley's eastern slopes until the moment of attack. Complete tactical surprise was achieved. Without warning, the Bulgars poured out of the valley's foothills and rampaged through the ill-fortified Byzantine encampment, massacring many of the imperial troopers before they had a chance to arm themselves. The Byzantine army disintegrated. Perhaps because Krum's

tactics specifically targeted enemy commanders, the *strategos* and many of the thematic officers were killed in the meleec. The Bulgars captured the imperial force's entire payroll and supply train. Relatively leaderless, the Byzantine survivors fled southward down the valley toward the safety of the Macedonian coastal plain while the Bulgars collected their plunder and withdrew northward to the Sofia Basin.<sup>21</sup>

Having disposed of the imperial army in the Struma valley, Krum turned to eliminating the Byzantine garrison at Serdika, knowing that their closest source of support had been eliminated. Time was of the essence since he probably sought to capture the fortress before word of his Struma victory reached Constantinople and the authorities there could dispatch a relief force from Thrace. In taking Serdika, Krum could turn the strategic tables on Byzantium by blocking the empire's expansion into the northwest, opening an unobstructed route for extending Bulgar control into Macedonia, and ultimately pinning the Byzantines in the Balkans within their Greek and Aegean coastal possessions. At the very least, all of Emperor Nikephoros's expansionary gains to the north of Greece made since 807 would be erased.<sup>22</sup> Krum needed to take Serdika without having recourse to a lengthy siege. As luck would have it, he was handed the means to accomplish that feat.

When Krum reunited his army before Serdika in March 809, word reached him that some of the garrison's officers were discontented with the emperor and his taxation, military, and pro-icon religious policies. Contact with the malcontents was established and Krum convinced them to open the city's gates to him. Whether Krum made promises of leniency for Serdika's garrison and civilians remains unknown. Once the gates were opened, the Bulgars massacred virtually the entire garrison (said to have numbered 6000 men) and a large number of civilians. Serdika's fortifications were dismantled and some civilian structures ruined. The traitorous Byzantine officers were spared the slaughter and allowed to escape while the civilian survivors made off as best they could to imperial territory in Thrace. Content with checking Byzantium's efforts to outflank his southwestern borders, Krum and his army decamped for their own lands on the Danubian Plain, leaving Serdika partially demolished and totally abandoned.<sup>23</sup>

News of the twin defeats inflicted by the Bulgars reached Constantinople by the opening of Christian Holy Week (in 809, 1 April), the most sacred period on the Orthodox calendar. With religious emotions running high, tidings of the Christian empire's losses at pagan

hands stirred strong feelings of anger and revenge among the populace and the imperial court. Nikephoros immediately mustered a force of some 17,000 men (probably all cavalry), comprised of the imperial *tagmata* and elements of the Thracian *themata*, and on 3 April led them northward by forced marches in a swift retaliatory invasion of the Bulgar state. Traveling by way of Markellai and entering Bulgar territory through Rish Pass, by Easter Sunday (8 April) Nikephoros reached the undefended Bulgar capital at Pliska. He had encountered no appreciable resistance because Krum and his main force had yet to return from their operations in the west. After celebrating Easter in Krum's wooden palace and forwarding pompous holyday greetings to Constantinople, the emperor had Pliska's "inner city" sacked and burned before setting out for Serdika, which he intended to refortify and garrison.<sup>24</sup>

The forces of Krum and Nikephoros did not collide during their opposite journeys between Serdika and Pliska because the two armies took different routes that placed them on opposite sides of the Balkan Mountains during their marches. Krum's Bulgars probably passed over the mountains from the Sofia Basin directly onto the Danubian Plain. Nikephoros's Byzantines very likely headed southwestward from Pliska, crossed the mountains by way of Vürbitsa Pass, and then marched due west following the valley separating the Balkan Mountains from the Sredna Gora (today known as the "Valley of the Roses"), from which they passed through the western-most Sredna Gora and into the Sofia Basin. On the March, Nikephoros received a petition from Serdika's garrison officers who had escaped the debacle requesting immunity from punishment for surrendering the city. The emperor, still angered by the fall of Serdika, refused their request, despite knowing that his refusal probably would lead them to defect and enter the Bulgar *han's* service, which they promptly did after learning of Nikephoros's response.<sup>25</sup>

On reaching Serdika, the emperor was anxious to reconstruct the fortifications immediately but trouble among his troops trumped those plans. Apparently the majority (if not all) of the force with Nikephoros consisted of the elite imperial tagmatic units. Not only did they think that such manual labor as clearing debris and constructing walls was beneath their dignity but they were disgruntled over not being paid, since the emperor had marched on Pliska so hurriedly that their payroll was left behind in Constantinople.<sup>26</sup> When a ruse designed by Nikephoros to trick the men into volunteering to perform the construction work backfired, the troops mutinied and it required all of the



emperor's personal bravery and pragmatic stubbornness to quell matters, assisted by promises of immediate departure for the capital and swift distribution of pay after arrival. Nikephoros was forced to abandon his plans for Serdika and return to Constantinople, leaving behind a partially ruined and uninhabited city that became a source of pickings for the local Shopi Slavs. They eventually built their own urban settlement there—Sredets—mostly outside of the former site.<sup>27</sup>

In 809 Byzantium's Arab enemies in the east fell into civil war that crippled their abilities to threaten imperial Anatolia, freeing Nikephoros to undertake the next best thing to garrisoning Serdika in securing Struma Macedonia for Byzantium. With his census and tax reforms completed, he tapped the newly revealed excess Anatolian population for colonizing Greece, Western Thrace, and the Struma valley with Orthodox Greekspeakers. Between September 809 and Easter 810 thousands of Anatolian families were forcibly uprooted from their homesteads and transferred to the Balkans for resettlement. While they were given land grants in their new Balkan home regions and furnished short-term tax remissions, levels of disgruntlement among the settlers ran high. Virtually all of the Greek peninsula and a good stretch of the Stuma valley were repopulated by such colonists, most of whose land grants were classified as military holdings, permitting Nikephoros to create the new Balkan themes of Peleponnesos, Kephalelia, and Thessaloniki. In conjunction with the existing themes of Thrace, Macedonia, and Hellas (once their forces were rebuilt to full strength after the recent fiascoes), the new themes provided Byzantium with a potential total of 14,000 Balkan thematic troops.<sup>28</sup>

Details of Bulgar internal developments are lacking for the period between 809 and 811, after which large-scale warfare between the *han-ate* and the empire again erupted. Indirect evidence indicates that Krum increased raiding activity in Byzantine Thracian possessions during that time.<sup>29</sup> He had his palace and the rest of Pliska's "inner city," burned during Nikephoros's Holy Week incursion, rebuilt. While his dual victories over the Byzantines might have offset the negative impact of Pliska's sacking, the possibility that Krum's leadership may have been somewhat weakened by that event cannot be discounted.

Krum's reign generally is viewed as the catalyst for creating strong centralized Bulgar state authority, despite the near total absence of source documentation supporting such a contention. Only a single source from a century after the fact provided a suggestion of centralization. A

fragmentary excerpt of ordinances attributed to Krum referred to the first known set of laws issued within the Bulgar state. Whether that fragment was part of statewide statutes that Krum's government could enforce or was merely an expression of personal, local, or regional regulations is debatable, but Bulgarian scholars have generally embraced the former option.<sup>30</sup>

Krum faced the same problems that plagued all rulers of warrior-based state entities—retaining the continued loyalty and obedience of his subordinate clan *boili* and their warrior followers. That he ultimately succeeded in achieving that aim may speak for the maturation of long-standing institutional efforts to centralize power, but there exist other possibilities that appear equally valid, given the lack of sources. For instance, it was possible that his military operations were so successful and fruitful (in terms of plunder) that the Bulgar *boili* and *bagaini* willingly rendered Krum obedience and service. Or perhaps Krum's renown as a successful military leader attracted such a numerous personal retinue of dependent warriors that he could effectively impose his authority throughout the *hanate's* territories, punishing any clan leader who had the temerity to oppose him. It also is possible that Krum simply purchased the obedience of the Bulgar clan *boili* and regional *bagaini* by guaranteeing their social privileges and permitting them extensive local independence in return for their loyal service. All of these alternatives were possible in the warrior state of the Bulgars and none required the suppression of the traditional Bulgar elite or the creation of solid, stable institutions of central governance.<sup>31</sup>

By early 811 Emperor Nikephoros was confident that he could deal decisively with the Bulgars and recover most lost imperial Balkan lands. He intended to conduct an anti-Bulgar military offensive of such overwhelming magnitude that a definitive victory would be assured. The objective of the operation was the destruction of the Bulgar state and the reestablishment of the Danube as Byzantium's northern Balkan border. The emperor spent the two years following his Holy Week campaign rebuilding and expanding the empire's thematic military in the Balkans, mending domestic political fences as best he could with domestic political and religious opposition, increasing his fiscal resources for funding the massive military operation that he planned, and expanding the number of full-time mounted elite troops by creating a new imperial *tagma*), the *Hikanatoi*, led by Nikephoros's son Stavrakios and recruited from among the sons of leading military commanders who were aged 15 and older.<sup>32</sup>

Throughout March and April Nikephoros assembled the largest imperial military force in the Balkans since the time of Constantine V. All four of the mounted elite tagmatic units were included, although only two—the *Exkoubitoi* and the *Vigla*—were specifically mentioned in later post-campaign casualty reports.<sup>33</sup> They constituted the core shock force of the invasion army, the rest of which was composed of the Thracian thematic force and troops from the Anatolian themes, less small holding forces left behind to keep watch over the Arabs. All told, Nikephoros’s army may have approached a paper strength of 60,000–70,000 men, but only 25,000–30,000 men actually took the field, supplemented by a contingent of irregular “volunteers,” who served with their own arms and at their own expense. So certain was the emperor of ultimate victory that he brought along on campaign a number of high ranking court officials, including his son and junior emperor Stavrakios, his son-in-law and *kouropalates* (majordomo from the imperial family) Michael Rangabe, the prefect of Constantinople, and various greater and lesser court dignitaries, lending the operation a pseudo-ceremonial atmosphere. Since Nikephoros’s three new Balkan themes were not yet organized, the Hellas thematic force was preoccupied with consolidating imperial control in Greece, and the Macedonian thematic army still was being rebuilt after its losses in 809, those troops were left behind as a rear guard of sorts.<sup>34</sup>

Nikephoros set out from Constantinople at the head of his grand host in May 811 and headed northward for the frontier fortress of Markellai, where all of the army’s constituent units were to concentrate. As the emperor’s force made slow, processional-like progress through Thrace, the sheer spectacle of its size, with the glittering imperial court and colorful courtier entourage at its center, made an impressive sight for all who witnessed its passage. Such was precisely the effect that Nikephoros intended, with Empress Eirene’s tour through northern Thrace some 30 years earlier in mind. Besides impressing the provincial population with imperial majesty, it was hoped that advanced word of the overwhelming power the empire was about to unleash would reach the Bulgars, frighten them, and soften them for the kill. By the time the imperial army gathered outside Markellai in June, Krum definitely was disturbed by the size of the threatening host and was duly conciliatory. He sent an embassy to Nikephoros suing for peace, but the emperor and his councilors, certain of ultimate victory, refused the overture out of hand.<sup>35</sup> The optimism of the emperor and his courtiers was only slightly

dampened when, sometime before the final advance into Bulgar territory began, Byzantios, Nikephoros's favorite servant, defected to Krum, taking with him a number of the emperor's silk robes and 100 pounds of gold.<sup>36</sup>

The rest of June and early July were devoted to Byzantine diversionary attacks and feints against various passes through the eastern Balkan Mountains aimed at confounding, dividing, and frightening their outnumbered Bulgar and Slavic guards. Many of the defenders, terrified by the size and operational effectiveness of the imperial troops, fled from their positions behind the wooden palisades erected to obstruct the passes for refuge in the mountains' interior. Despite the intelligence concerning Nikephoros's invasion plans almost certainly furnished him by Byzantios (or perhaps because of it), Krum kept most of his available forces secure in the mountains but ordered a contingent of his personal retinue (exaggeratedly said to have numbered 12,000 men) to defend Pliska and its palace district as best they could against the looming onslaught. He also dispatched emissaries to his Avar and Slavic clients in southern Pannonia, as well as to the *zhupani* of *Sklaviniai* in Macedonia and northern Thrace, urgently requesting significant military assistance.<sup>37</sup>

On 11 July Nikephoros commenced the all-out assault on the Bulgar state, with the capital at Pliska as the initial objective.<sup>38</sup> Having cleared the way during the preliminary operations, the army poured into Bulgar territory virtually unopposed over a number of eastern Balkan Mountain passes, with the main force probably using Rish Pass while other detachments crossed by way of the Aitos and Vürbitsa passes, to the east and west of Rish, respectively.<sup>39</sup> Outnumbered and with most of his troops holed up in the mountains to escape possible destruction, Krum could do little other than observe the Byzantines swarming onto the lowlands toward Pliska, rally or reorganize those of his men who were demoralized by the initial Byzantine actions, and await the arrival of much needed reinforcements.

News of the Byzantines' imminent appearance at Pliska sparked a mass exodus of the capital's civilian inhabitants, who fled into the surrounding countryside or the nearby foothills seeking refuge from likely ravages. Awaiting the invaders behind earthwork defenses was the heavily outnumbered elite Bulgar detachment charged by Krum with defending Pliska's "inner city" palace district. On arrival, Nikephoros ordered the city's inner fortifications stormed and no quarter given to the Bulgar garrison. The Bulgar defenders virtually died to the last man. Byzantine casualties were light. Another Bulgar force (reportedly numbering 15,000

men, but probably far fewer) was caught on the surrounding plain by elements of the converging imperial army and annihilated. Once those two forces were destroyed, the Byzantines faced no further resistance in the Bulgar capital and its plundering commenced. Nikephoros forwarded dispatches to Constantinople announcing his triumphs and giving the lone credit for them to advice provided him by his son Stavrakios while, at the same time, he apparently berated his army's high commanders, many of whom may have expressed opposition to the campaign prior to the start of the invasion.<sup>40</sup>

With Krum and his cowed troops hovering in the mountains southwest of Pliska, the imperial army settled into the great expanse of the capital's "outer city" and Nikephoros commenced an extensive search of the palace for the Bulgar *han's* treasures. On discovering them, the emperor kept a significant portion of gold and silver items for the imperial treasury, placing them in sealed chests under lock and key, and distributed the remaining treasures as booty to the tagmatic troops in allotments proportionate to rank standing in the army's muster rolls. Krum's wine cellars were thrown open to the troopers, who also were treated to a victory banquet. During the several days the Byzantines spent in systematically plundering whatever moveable and immovable spoils that struck their fancy, Nikephoros grew blatantly euphoric, regally strolling the halls and terraces of Krum's wooden palace complex and ruminating aloud about constructing a new city on Pliska's site that he would name in honor of himself.<sup>41</sup>

Once the city was sufficiently looted, the emperor ordered the surrounding countryside ravaged. The troops first foraged for provisions from the crops in the fields to support their ensuing march. What was not taken as provisions or forage was destroyed. The same applied to animals, with those not carried off maimed or slaughtered. The local Bulgars who had remained on their land, instead of fleeing for safety into the hills, paid a heavy price in depredations and deaths. Atrocities perpetrated by the imperial troops on the rural Bulgars were widespread, with stories later circulating that described Bulgar babies being thrown into grain threshing machines. Reports of the Byzantines' enormities reached Krum who, still awaiting oncoming Slavic and Avar reinforcements, could do nothing to stop the enemy's ravages. He sent an emissary to Nikephoros acknowledging that the empire had prevailed and offering the emperor safe passage if he would simply take all that he wanted in plunder and vacate Bulgar territory as quickly as possible. Nikephoros,

flushed with his achievements to date and confident that the Bulgar state would soon be obliterated, ignored Krum's initiative.<sup>42</sup>

After spending almost a week pillaging Pliska and ravaging the countryside, on 21 July Nikephoros ordered the army to break camp in the "outer city" and march on Serdika, hoping to reestablish imperial control of the Sofia Basin and inflict the culminating defeat on the Bulgars somewhere along the way.<sup>43</sup> As the troops moved out, the emperor had the wooden palace district and the timber palisade atop its surrounding earthwork set ablaze, reducing the heart of the Bulgar capital to charred ruins for the second time in two years. With great columns of smoke billowing into the sky to their rear, the Byzantines plodded southwestward in the general direction of Serdika, following the route apparently taken by Nikephoros's force in 809.

Progress was leisurely. The emperor and his courtiers were exceedingly confident in ultimate victory after easily capturing the enemy's capital so the advance remained almost procession-like. Also contributing to the slow progress was the erosion of discipline that afflicted much of the army. Days spent freely looting with no concern for immediate danger had sapped the martial spirit of many thematic troopers and the "volunteer" irregulars, all of whom were anxious to return to their homes and enjoy their spoils. As the army progressed toward the mountains, unit cohesion began to suffer, with increasing numbers of men breaking ranks to plunder or desert. Nikephoros's officers, growing disturbed about the indiscipline spreading among the troops, urged him to halt the campaign and return to imperial territory as quickly as possible, but the emperor paid no heed to their remonstrations.<sup>44</sup>

The favorable developments for which Krum hoped at the outset of the imperial onslaught coalesced by the time the Byzantines neared the Balkan Mountain foothills. Nikephoros's lengthy sack of Pliska and its environs, coupled with the slow pace of the imperial army's advance toward Serdika, gave Krum the time to successfully rally his forces and conduct widespread additional recruitment among his subjects, an effort so desperate that women were armed and placed into the ranks.<sup>45</sup> Reports from scouts observing the Byzantines' progress kept him informed of the enemy's line of march as well as of the growing indiscipline displayed among their units. As the crowning development, the crucial Slavic and Avar reinforcements arrived from Macedonia and Pannonia, furnishing Krum with the fresh blood needed to augment his surviving retinue as the army's core strike force and to bolster his remaining men's morale.<sup>46</sup>

Although his army was rejuvenated, Krum realized that it could not face the large Byzantine host in open battle. His only hope for achieving any sort of victory and exacting revenge for the sacking of Pliska lay in catching the Byzantines by ambush in the mountains. For that to occur, Nikephoros must continue marching southwestward for the Vürbitsa Pass on his way to Serdika and not turn due west north of the Balkan range and head across the Danubian Plain for one of the passes opening directly into the Sofia Basin, as had Krum in 809. In the event, Krum's luck held. By Thursday, 24 July, the imperial army unmistakably was headed southward into the mountains. Advanced elements entered the northern reaches of Vürbitsa Pass, some 30 miles (45 km) southwest of Pliska, while the trailing imperial units pushed through a defile cut by the Kamchiya (or Ticha) River in the Preslav Mountains, regional foothills north of the Balkan Mountains, and into the rolling Gerlovo Basin leading to the mouth of the pass.<sup>47</sup> With his enemy committed to the Vürbitsa route, Krum could organize a decisive counterstroke (Fig. 3.2).

When the advanced guard in Vürbitsa Pass reported to Nikephoros's headquarters that the way through was obstructed by a substantial log palisade, and other reports arrived noting that enemy troops were observed on the surrounding heights, the emperor ordered an immediate halt while he discussed the situation with his army's commanders. Although details remain unknown, the discussions must have been heated. At one point, Nikephoros reportedly grew so angry with his son Stavrakios (who acted as the commanders' spokesperson) for urging a swift retreat to Markellai to forestall a Bulgar entrapment that the two men nearly came to blows. In the end, the army sat spread along the road in the Gerlovo Basin for almost two days while the emperor quarreled with his top commanders. Such bickering among the leaders, together with the army's inexplicable inaction, further undermined the already eroding morale of the thematic and irregular troops, among whom unauthorized absences to search for loot grew. By Friday, 25 July, Nikephoros came to realize the danger faced by his army, but it was too late.<sup>48</sup>

The imperial army's inactivity provided the Bulgars with ample opportunity to scout its deployment in detail. Krum learned that the Byzantines were encamped not in a single, large, fortified camp but in a series of smaller ones, with each thematic force having its own and all of them pitched at some distance from one another. The camps were spread along the road running from the Preslav Mountains defile, in the

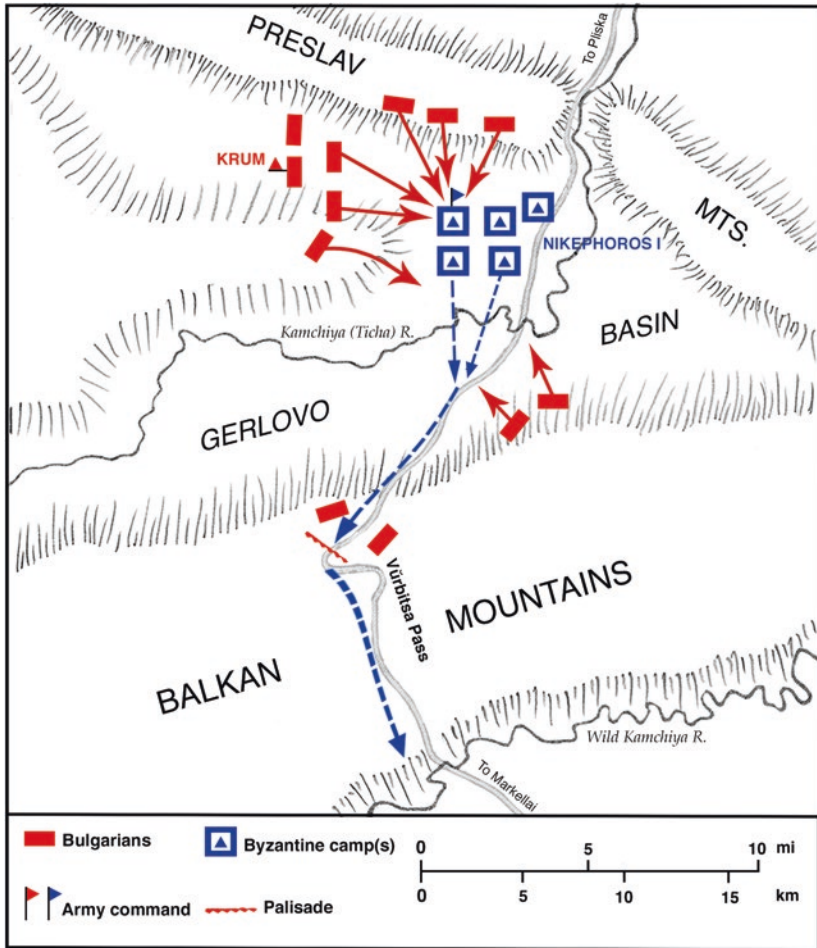


Fig. 3.2 Battle of Vürbitsa Pass, 26 July 811

north, southward to the Kamchiya River, which snaked from west to east across the middle of the basin and then turned northward through the defile. Most of the camps lay north and west of the river, using it as their primary water source. Nikephoros's camp housed the courtiers and the imperial tagmatic units and was easily identifiable by its size and the glittering colors of its tents and banners. No camp was well fortified



since the halt initially was thought temporary, but other factors, such as overconfidence on the part of the emperor and his courtiers, disgruntlement among the thematic commanders, and demoralization within the troops' ranks, also contributed to the lax security as the temporary halt extended into days. From all of the camps except the emperor's, disorganized groups of soldiers milled about the basin, apparently oblivious to their enemy's proximity.<sup>49</sup>

By late Friday evening Krum had his men deployed on the heights surrounding the basin and flanking the pass for an early predawn attack on the stalled Byzantine army. Light infantry was stationed on the heights to either side of the road leading through the pass as far as the palisade and on the mountain slopes facing the road from the east. Additional infantry was placed on the southern slopes of the Preslav Mountains to the north of the enemy encampments and among the hills extending into the basin from the west. Because the basin's rolling surface offered the only terrain favorable for mounted operations, most of Krum's cavalry was concentrated in the west under cover of those same hills.<sup>50</sup>

Krum's battle plan was simple and ultimately effective. He decided on a night operation to mask his army's numerical inferiority and help engender confusion and fear among the Byzantines. The main Bulgar assault force of cavalry and infantry was to advance from the west and north on the emperor's camp while the rest of the troops raised a loud ruckus from their positions on the heights above the other Byzantine camps and undertook demonstrations to confound and frighten the enemy, who would be awakened from sleep. Once the elite tagmatic force was defeated and the emperor's camp overrun, the resulting collapse of enemy morale should lead to their defeat in detail, with the various camps falling like dominoes from north to south. A general advance by all Bulgar units would then push the broken enemy southward through the pass until the survivors were driven completely from Bulgar territory. As events transpired, the battle evolved better than planned.<sup>51</sup>

In the very dark early predawn hours of Saturday, 26 July, sentinels in the emperor's camp were alerted by an ominous wailing coming from the nearby high ground. In short order the unnerving noise increased in scope as it spread across most of the heights abutting the basin. It was a sound made by thousands of men (and women also, in this case) hollering war cries and clattering arms. Half awake, the tagmatic troops in the emperor's camp hastily pulled on their armor, grabbed their weapons,

and fell into formation just as they were struck by an avalanche of Bulgar, Slav, and Avar warriors rushing on them from at least two directions. Vicious, disorganized, and deadly fighting erupted, with Nikephoros, many of his courtiers, and a number of tagmatic officers killed in the early minutes of the violent initial melee. With the emperor dead, many other imperial leaders down, and the Bulgars infiltrating the camp, those tagmatic troopers and courtiers able to break away from the combat ran for their horses and fled southward toward Vürbitsa Pass, among them the mortally wounded son and successor of Nikephoros, Stavrakios (811), and the *kouropalates* who soon would be that imperial successor's successor, Michael Rangabe (811–813).

The troops in the thematic camps had also been awakened by the clamor cascading down from the dark surrounding heights. As they stumbled half-asleep out of their tents, the frightening noise made by the enemy hidden in the darkness and a rain of arrows undermined their already unsteady martial commitment to the campaign and intensified their desire to return home with all speed. Soon after forming confused ranks inside their camps, the sounds of tumultuous combat were discerned coming from the emperor's camp by those within hearing distance of the struggle, followed shortly by the appearance of fugitive tagmatic troopers and news of Nikephoros's death, the collapse of the army's elite force, and the capture of the emperor's camp. In moments, the fleeing tagmatic troops were joined by thematic soldiers who progressively abandoned their camps, hastening southward toward the pass and the safety of imperial territory lying on its far side. As the Byzantines ran from their camps, they were pressed by an increasing number of Bulgars descending from the heights and joining the initial assault force in the pursuit.

A battle that constituted a very serious Byzantine defeat once the army's camps were abandoned and overrun was transformed into a major catastrophe by two succeeding developments that probably not even Krum envisioned beforehand.

Fed by a number of small rivers and numerous streams, the Kamchiya River ran full but sluggishly in summer as it crossed the Gerlovo Basin, a condition that turned long stretches of its banks into marshes and bogs. The road to Vürbitsa Pass from the north crossed the river by means of one of the few fording points along its length in the basin.<sup>52</sup>

In their mass flight toward the pass and perceived safety, the fugitive Byzantines reached the leg of the river bisecting the basin into northern

and southern halves. As far as the panicked troopers were concerned, their lives depended on crossing to the southern side. Those fortunate enough to have arrived on the northern bank facing a ford found the river a minor obstacle that barely slowed their passage, but many who reached the river found themselves confronted by wide swaths of marshland or bog. With the Bulgars bearing down on their rear, these unfortunates could only attempt riding or swimming through the marshes to gain the other side. Cavalry having arrived ahead of the infantry, they urged their horses into the water, where the front ranks soon found themselves mired in the suctioning muck of the riverbed. The fugitives' fear and the continuous pressure exerted by the pursuing Bulgars made stopping at the river bank impossible. Those who became stuck in the morass and floundered in the river soon found themselves tumbled upon and pressed below the water's surface by those immediately behind, who, in turn, were themselves driven forward by those in their rear. Soon, in almost conveyer belt-like fashion, the riverbed filled with the bodies of dead men and horses as troopers were continuously bundled into the river, became mired, and then trampled on and drowned by those pushing from behind. Finally, so many corpses accumulated in the river and its marshy banks that fords of sorts were created over which those in the rear, both fleeing Byzantines and Bulgar pursuers, used to get across.<sup>53</sup>

Those Byzantines who reached firm footing on the opposite bank assumed that escape was assured. They needed only to traverse the mountain pass lying ahead to find safety on imperial territory. Unfortunately, as they continued their headlong flight into the pass through a gauntlet of enemy archers firing on them from the flanking heights, they ran up against the log palisade completely straddling its width. Despite the facts that the Bulgars could not man the barricade because the parapet on its interior directly faced the oncoming fugitives, and the pressure of the Bulgar pursuit was lessening because of the river crossing, the routed Byzantines once again fell into panic on finding their escape route barred by the high wooden obstacle. Those who were mounted abandoned their horses, rushed to the barrier, and desperately sought ways to cross it while enemy missiles rained down from the heights above. Many threw themselves over the top of the palisade, only to fall into the bottom of the deep ditch on the other side, the majority suffering bodily injury or death. Others attempted to pry openings in the log barrier with their weapons to little avail. Still others successfully set portions of the palisade alight, burning through the ropes lashing

the logs together and toppling the loosened portions forward across the ditch as makeshift bridges. Men poured across those impromptu spans but, with the timber and remaining lashings weakened by the flames, they soon collapsed amid flying sparks and embers, carrying the men and horses crossing them to a fiery death in the ditch. Just as at the river, the road to escape was reopened only after the ditch became filled high enough with wood debris and corpses for the surviving, panic-stricken fugitives to cross over and flee down the rest of the pass to eventual safety.<sup>54</sup>

Although some Bulgar detachments undoubtedly continued to follow the broken remnants of the Byzantine host until close to the frontier, the main Bulgar pursuit ended at the palisade since, having won the field, the Bulgars' interests turned toward more materially lucrative endeavors. As dawn broke, Krum's victorious troops jubilantly picked over the rich cache of spoils littering the battlefield. Numerous captives were gathered and herded off for resettlement in the *hanate's* distant and sparsely populated trans-Danubian frontiers, where they would serve as the Bulgar state's newest border guardians. Emperor Nikephoros's body was discovered, probably by its attire, among the corpses strewn about the wreckage of the imperial camp, the scene of the most intense combat during the battle. It was decapitated and the severed head brought to Krum as a victory trophy. He had it hung on a pole and planted in front of his tent for a week so that all of his troops and allies could view it and appreciate the magnitude of the triumph won under his leadership. Shortly thereafter, he ordered Nikephoros's skull stripped, cleaned, dried, and the top sawed off at brow level. The skull's crown then was lined with silver as a ceremonial drinking cup that Krum first used at a feast celebrating the victory, during which it was filled with wine and passed among his allied Slavic *zhupani*, who drank toasts from it in turn.<sup>55</sup>

For Byzantium, the battle at Vŭrbitsa Pass was both a defeat and a humiliation of the first magnitude. Not since the death of Valens (364–378) in battle against the Goths at Adrianople in 378 had an emperor been killed in combat. To have the pagan Bulgar victors treat Nikephoros's corpse in such a degrading fashion was an intolerable insult to Byzantium's imperial mystique. Nor had so many important imperial dignitaries and military commanders been killed in a single action as had been in the trouncing inflicted by the Bulgars. Among the dead were Constantinople's city prefect, several patrician officials, the commanders of the *Exkoubitoi* and *Vigla* imperial *tagmata*, numerous tagmatic

junior officers, and many of the young, socially notable troopers of the elite *Hikanatoi*—all of whom had borne the brunt of the initial Bulgar assault and were the first to suffer at the river and palisade during the rout. Casualties among the thematic forces, generally incurred during the rout, were numerous. The *strategoi* of the Thracian and Anatolikon themes were killed, as were many of their subordinate officers. All told, Byzantine losses were exceptionally high.<sup>56</sup>

While most of the casualties among the troops were made good within a year of the battle, the defeat scarred the psyche of the empire's top leadership. Not only had one emperor been killed in battle but his successor Stavrakios, ghastly wounded in the spine and side during the combat, carried to safety during the rout, but thereafter left agonizingly bedridden, held the throne for less than three months before being deposed by his brother-in-law Michael I Rangabe and dying in early January 812. In his turn as emperor, Michael displayed no real determination to meet the Bulgars again in battle, winning one minor victory in three generally lackluster efforts. The army's commanders were stupefied by the completely unexpected and devastating disaster that ended the campaign. Some surviving officers deserted the military profession altogether, forsook worldly life, and entered monasteries. They, like most of their fellow Christian Byzantines, could only attribute the spectacular reversal to divine punishment for some spiritual transgression on the part of the imperial leadership.<sup>57</sup>

Luckily for Byzantium, Krum could not take full advantage of Byzantine disarray during much of the year following Vürbitsa. Despite their resounding victory, the Bulgars' condition was nearly as bad as their defeated enemy. Pliska's palace district, the symbolic seat of Bulgar power, lay in ruins, representing a blow to the Bulgar leadership's prestige. Their casualties had been proportionally higher than the Byzantines' since the losses suffered during the campaign's opening stages probably represented a higher percentage of their total available military strength than did the battle losses of their enemy at its conclusion.<sup>58</sup> Only the reinforcements provided by Krum's Avar clients and Slavic allies made Bulgar success possible. Beyond restoring his capital, Krum needed to capitalize on the enormous personal prestige gained by his victory to rebuild his army and forge stronger alliances with the neighboring *Sklaviniai*. Both required time. The grisly fate of Nikephoros's skull, in its roles as victory trophy and drinking cup, was Krum's first initiative in a lengthy attempt to achieve those goals.

He undertook successful efforts to cement his authority over his *boili* and subject Slavic *zhupani*, although the details of the process remain unknown. His newly won renown attracted to his personal retinue warriors from throughout the northern Balkans and southern Pannonia, and his deference to allied Slavic leaders at the post-battle victory feast earned their continued loyalty.<sup>59</sup>

Although sources are lacking, it can be contended that the rise of Slavic dominance within the Bulgar state was furthered significantly by the demographic impact of the 811 campaign. The ethnic Bulgars suffered far higher losses in the fighting around Pliska than did their Slavic subjects, who mostly inhabited the state's peripheries. The fact that foreign Slavic allies were instrumental in gaining victory may have elevated the Bulgars' esteem for their native *zhupani*. Thereafter, the Slavs willingly served their undefeated ruler, who probably used them to fill the gaps in the military and administration caused by extensive Bulgar casualties. Whether Krum manipulated that situation to break the *boili's* traditional oligarchic control and replace it with his own autocratic rule, as some scholars have postulated, cannot be proven because no sources are extant. No doubt Krum spent nearly a year securing the support of all subject Bulgar and Slavic leaders, maintaining good relations with his allied *Sklaviniai*, and recruiting new warriors for his personal retinue.<sup>60</sup> All of those measures were in preparation for exerting the Bulgar *han-ate's* newly won position as a Balkan regional power. No longer ruler of a state struggling for survival, Krum now was a recognized conqueror with the assumed right to deal with Byzantium on an equal footing and actively compete with it for control of those Balkan regions remaining outside the two states' respective borders.<sup>61</sup>

Krum felt ready to flex his rejuvenated military muscles by spring 812. After attaining the throne, Emperor Michael had been occupied with domestic efforts cementing his acceptance as ruler, stabilizing relations with the newly proclaimed Frank western empire and its ruler Charlemagne, and rebuilding his imperial forces. Krum thus gained time to prepare a military initiative aimed at reducing the threat-in-being to his state's southern border posed by the chain of Byzantine fortresses in northern Thrace. Reducing or eliminating those fortresses would militarily render the common border shared by the two states a more "level playing field." The Bulgar *han* decided to turn the eastern flank of the fortress line and sever the main land route linking Constantinople to the Black Sea port-cities of Ankhialos and Mesembria. He marched his

army over the Balkan Mountains and invested the bastion of Debeltos, which controlled the north-south coastal road as it rounded the head of the Gulf of Burgas. Krum's siege forced the resident Orthodox bishop, George, to negotiate the surrender of the fortress and, in return for their lives being spared, agree to the resettlement of the city's few thousand inhabitants within the Bulgar state. As he previously had treated Serdika, Krum dismantled Debeltos's walls and left the city abandoned.<sup>62</sup>

Reports that Krum had crossed the border and invested Debeltos forced Michael to give immediate attention to the renewed Bulgar threat. He set out from Constantinople to relieve the fortress on 7 June, taking with him only his reconstituted tagmatic units and detachments of some Anatolian thematic troops since the Macedonian and Thracian thematic armies were still recovering from the heavy losses suffered at Vŭrbitsa. The campaign exposed the military's lack of confidence in Michael. The troops, untried and only perfunctorily trained, considered him henpecked by his wife and empress Prokopia, daughter of the deceased Nikephoros, who accompanied her husband during the initial march stage, and thus undeserving of respect. The officers were contemptuous of Micheal's attached advisors, who mostly were monks and courtiers lacking military experience. When news of Debeltos's fall and the fate of its populace reached the relief army before it made much headway northward, the troops refused to continue marching and publicly insulted the emperor and his minions. They were calmed only after Michael made a general distribution of money and cancelled the campaign.<sup>63</sup>

Word of the army's refusal to advance against the Bulgar invaders and the fate of Debeltos swiftly spread throughout the Thracian and Macedonian themes. Fear of eminent Bulgar attack spread quickly and grew pronounced in the frontier fortresses and towns of northern Thrace and the High Thracian Plain because their proximity to the border meant the Bulgars could fall on them with little notice. Most of the recently settled colonists in those regions fled their holdings and streamed southward, hoping to return to their original homes. The fortresses of Ankhialos, Markellai, Beroia, and Philippopolis were depopulated by their flight. Taking advantage of the situation, Krum had his men stage demonstrations throughout the empire's northern frontier regions, further encouraging the Byzantines to abandon their forts. Those Greek speakers who had been forcibly resettled in the Struma River valley by Nikephoros saw no reason to remain and hurriedly

decamped for the Aegean coast in hopes of returning to Anatolia, vacating the fort-city of Serres and other settlements. The exodus of imperial inhabitants extended as far south as the regions around Adrianople and Thessaloniki, leaving the forts of Thracian Nikaia (or Nike; m: Havsa), Probaton, and Philippi deserted.<sup>64</sup>

The mutiny of Michael's army, the collapse of the empire's northern frontier fortress line, and the flight of most recently settled regional colonists opened the door to Thrace for Krum. Bulgar detachments easily overran northern Thrace, captured or occupied all of Byzantium's Black Sea port-cities from Sozopolis north, with the exception of Mesembria, and, in the west, solidified Bulgar control over Serdika and the Sofia Basin. By late 812 the former Byzantine frontier fortress line had ceased to exist, the Bulgars controlled much of the Black Sea coast, the Thracian border separating the two warring states had been pushed southward at Byzantine expense, and the strategic military situation had swung in the Bulgars' favor. Many thematic troops settled in the overrun areas who had not fled their holdings joined the Bulgar forces, their number including several high ranking military officers. The non-thematic inhabitants who remained on their land or in the cities seem to have accepted the change from Byzantine to Bulgar authority with no apparent problems, possibly illustrating that they predominantly were Slavs rather than Greeks or Greek-speakers. Among them were some disaffected imperial religious-political minorities, such as Paulicians who had been resettled from Armenian lands by Constantine V in the previous century.<sup>65</sup>

Krum imposed a military-administrative structure on his new acquisitions south of the Balkan Mountains that, in organization, reflected the Bulgars' traditional Turkic military order of battle, the *sarakt*.<sup>66</sup> The new territories were divided into center, left (east), and right (west) wings, as was the army. The center region (its precise location unknown because of a lacuna in the sole source inscription for the organization) was commanded by Krum's brother (whose name likewise is unknown) with a certain "*strategos*" Leo, a Greek, ranked as his highest subordinate commander. The right wing, which included the region around Beroia (but other regions also included again are missing from the inscription) was placed under the command of the Bulgar *ichurgu-boila* Tuk, who had under him two subordinate Greek commanders ("*strategoi*"), Bardas and John. The left wing, encompassing the Black Sea coastal fortresses of Ankhialos, Debeltos, and Sozopolis and nearby locales, was commanded



by the Bulgar *boila kavhan* Irataïs, with the Greeks Kordylas and Gregoras serving as his chief subordinates.<sup>67</sup>

Anxious to secure his new Thracian border territories and gain time for further rebuilding his military strength, in late September Krum dispatched an embassy to Michael's court, headed by his Slavic princely retainer Dragomir (or Dargomir), proposing that the 716 peace treaty, originally concluded between Han Tervel and Emperor Theodosios III, be reinstated. Krum's proposal revived the pre-Eirene common border in northern Thrace, which did not require any additional territorial concessions on the empire's part, and stipulated an annual payment by the empire to the Bulgar ruler of clothes and dyed skins valued at 30 pounds of gold. The commercial right for Bulgar merchants to trade in Constantinople also was to be renewed. As his final proposal, both sides were to return all deserters, prisoners, and asylum seekers of the other. Krum added an incentive for Byzantine compliance with his terms by threatening to capture Mesembria, the last remaining imperial Black Sea port-city, if his terms were rebuffed.<sup>68</sup>

Given Byzantium's situation at the time, having suffered a major military disaster and the loss of northern Thrace to the Bulgars, Krum's peace terms were both moderate and reasonable. Yet Michael caved to pressure from his clerical political advisors and rejected the Bulgar proposals on the grounds that returning those Bulgars who had forsaken their pagan society and embraced that of the Christian empire was a violation of Gospel tenets. Perhaps the emperor hoped to negotiate revised terms but Krum was not amenable to that option.<sup>69</sup> On receiving word of Michael's decision, the Bulgar *han* lived up to his threat. In mid-October Krum moved against Mesembria.

The city, lying on the doorstep to Bulgar territory just across the Balkan Mountains to its north, was an important Byzantine port and fortress that played a crucial role in past conflicts with the Bulgars. As a fortress, it was exceptionally well-positioned to withstand attack. It sat on an island-like peninsula jutting into the Black Sea and tied to the mainland only by a short, narrow isthmus. Both the city and isthmus were defended by walled fortifications, with the ramparts facing the coastline especially strong. Any assault on them from the landward side was reduced to a front spanning the narrow width of the isthmus alone. Because of the city's strength, only a small permanent garrison was needed, and, without a navy, any attacker would have difficulty taking the place. Given Mesembria's natural defensive characteristics, Michael

and his courtiers underestimated Krum's ability to inflict the threatened punishment for rejecting his peace proposals.<sup>70</sup>

Despite its defenses, Krum captured Mesembria in a matter of two weeks. He massed his army along the coast facing the city, kept the garrison pinned down by constant demonstrations and sorties, and, assisted by Evmathios, a former Byzantine engineer who had deserted to him after the capture of Serdika, deployed assorted siege artillery that wreaked telling damage on the defense walls and the small number of defenders' will to resist. When it became obvious that no relief force would arrive from Constantinople, the garrison surrendered.

Mesembria had long been used by the empire as a depot, storage center, and treasury for supplying the northern fortress line and was loaded with goods and money when Krum's Bulgars entered the city at the close of October and commenced looting. Among the plunder were containers of the Byzantines' "Greek Fire." Together with the 36 projector-siphons for the liquid captured either in the city or earlier in Debeltos, Krum gained the potential to turn Byzantium's "secret weapon" on the empire itself. Surprisingly, no evidence exists indicating that the Bulgars used their find in any subsequent action, despite the presence of former imperial engineers in their ranks who certainly possessed the knowledge to employ the weapon. As he had Serdika and Debeltos, Krum ravaged Mesembria and left it deserted.<sup>71</sup>

The onset of winter usually brought a halt to military activities in the Balkans but in February 813 Krum, aiming to extend his string of victories, launched a swift surprise strike at a small Byzantine thematic force encamped near Adrianople. His operation was foiled, however, by two Byzantine captives who escaped from Bulgar territory and informed the imperial authorities of Krum's intentions. Acting with unaccustomed alacrity, Michael mustered his *tagmata* and on 15 February marched rapidly to the relief of the threatened Thracian units. He caught a detachment of Krum's troops unawares and inflicted numerous casualties on the surprised Bulgars. Unprepared to initiate a full-blown battle with a large Byzantine force, Krum decided to cut his losses and withdrew to his north Thracian territories. For the Bulgar *han*, the engagement was a minor reverse, but Michael treated the action as a major victory since it was the first of his reign. Soon thereafter, taking advantage of continuing peace with the Arabs, he began planning a massive spring campaign to crush decisively the threatening Bulgars.<sup>72</sup>

Following Nikephoros's example, Michael assembled a force of overwhelming size to unleash on the Bulgars. He called up the most recent,

barely trained recruits and mobilized contingents from every theme, including the frontier units facing the Arabs in eastern Anatolia, and ordered them to muster in southeastern Thrace by early spring. The Anatolian forces, especially the border troops who usually did not serve outside their immediate locales, were unenthusiastic about the emperor's orders. Troops from the Armeniakon theme were particularly disgruntled by the mobilization. The eastern units arrived in Thrace by early April, where they united with the Thracian and Macedonian thematic forces on the plains outside Constantinople. All told, the thematic component of Michael's grand army probably numbered around 26,000 men, and, once it was joined by the imperial *tagmata* units (4000 or more men) accompanying the emperor, that total may have reached as many as 30,000–36,000 troops.<sup>73</sup>

Having mobilized a large army, Michael made what proved to be the fatal mistakes of delaying the campaign's start and then failing to advance quickly on the Bulgars after it began. The thematic forces assembled in Thrace sat idle for a month before Michael left the capital at the beginning of May with his *tagmata* and wife Prokopia in tow. Despite leaving Prokopia behind soon after setting out, Michael once again suffered ridicule from the troops over being henpecked. His leadership was further undermined on 4 May when a solar eclipse was interpreted by the army as a sign of coming disaster. Michael's repetition of surrounding himself on campaign with clerical and courtier advisors again earned him the scorn of his senior military commanders. His failure to advance on Mesembria and restore the city to imperial control, and his wasting another entire month marching and countermarching around southern Thrace on the ridiculous advice of his councilors that the Bulgars would never attack him if he remained on imperial territory, caused morale within the ranks to plummet. The Anatolian thematic troops resented being taken from their homesteads during spring planting season and shipped to a distant region of the empire for the purposes of accomplishing what appeared to be nothing. Moreover, the empire's Thracian population was subjected to widespread plundering as if invaded by an enemy because the army was forced to forage for provisions to maintain itself during its extended stay on imperial soil.<sup>74</sup>

Discontent over Michael's indecision and obvious military incompetence grew daily among the empire's troops, the Balkan provincial population, and among an expanding opposition element in the capital.<sup>75</sup> Bowing to the growing pressure, the emperor advanced the army nearer

to Bulgar territory in the vicinity of Adrianople, where he again ordered a halt some six miles (10 km) northeast of the city and encamped. Meanwhile, Michael's dallying had permitted Krum to collect troops from among his Bulgar and Slavic subjects and allies, the total number of whom is unknown other than they were outnumbered by their Byzantine enemies. Krum arrived with his force north of Adrianople during the first week in June, where he was informed of the size and location of Michael's army. Realizing he was outnumbered, on 7 June he halted, pitched camp, and awaited developments near the deserted Byzantine fort of Versinikia, which lay a distance north of Adrianople. Both sides were aware of the other's presence in the area but both were wary of making the first move. Michael's two highest subordinate officers—John Aplakes, *strategos* of Macedonia and commander of the army's right wing, and Leo the Armenian, *strategos* of the Anatolikon theme and left wing commander—unsuccessfully urged him to attack the Bulgars immediately after learning of their arrival. Still clinging to the timid advice of his councilors, Michael refused to act.<sup>76</sup>

For two weeks the contending sides conducted a daily ritual of marching out of their respective camps, maneuvering for position, drawing up in lines of battle facing one another, and undertaking brief, long-range skirmishes, with neither initiating conclusive combat. Both armies suffered from the increasing midsummer heat but the Byzantines paid a significantly higher toll in human and animal exhaustion because their armor and equipment generally was heavier than the Bulgars'. While food and water in the imperial camp ran short, the Bulgars enjoyed unpillaged fields to their rear and usually maneuvered themselves to lie between the Byzantines and the Tundzha River, thus assuring themselves of dependable sources for both. Detachments of Bulgar troops demonstrated continuously against Adrianople and the few manned smaller forts in the vicinity, keeping their garrisons pinned inside and preventing them from succoring the main imperial force. The cost of the stagnant military situation on Michael's troops was increasing indiscipline and demoralization, especially among the Anatolian units.<sup>77</sup>

At last, John Aplakes could tolerate no more of the debilitating inactivity imposed by his ruler. On the night of 21 June he informed Michael that he intended to attack the Bulgars to his front the next day and that he expected the army's center, commanded by the emperor, and Leo's wing to support him. Aplakes's plan was seconded by Leo, who assured the emperor that the men would fight until victory was attained.

Michael, faced with what amounted to an ultimatum from his highest subordinate commanders, realized that he now had only two options: He must either attack and hope for victory, or retreat and accept ignominious shame. He chose the former<sup>78</sup> (Fig. 3.3).

The next day, 22 June, the contending armies marched from their encampments and maneuvered into battle formations on the rolling, partially wooded plain north of Adrianople, in the vicinity where, 22 years earlier, Kardam's Bulgars had fought an inconclusive skirmish with the Byzantines under Constantine VI. On that occasion, the Bulgars kept mostly to the woods, but Krum was no Kardam. He deployed his troops into battle lines on open ground despite his numerical inferiority. More troubling to him than being outnumbered, however, was that, on this day, the Byzantines maneuvered into position on high ground along a ridge, forcing Krum to form his troops in the swale between it and the next ridge to the northwest. As was common for the time, Krum deployed his army for battle in two lines, with infantry in the center and cavalry on the flanks of each. His second line may have taken position either behind the front line at a distance closer than was normal or behind an intervening ridge, making it difficult to discern from the Byzantine position. Such a deployment, combined with the fact that the length of the Bulgars' front line was shorter than their enemies' because they had fewer troops, created the optical illusion, from the Byzantine perspective, that Krum was outnumbered by a wider margin than actually was the case.<sup>79</sup>

True to his plan, Aplakes opened the battle with a furious charge by his Macedonian thematic contingents against the left of the Bulgar front line. The Byzantine attackers poured down the ridge's slope, braving a hail storm of Bulgar arrows, and crashed headlong into the enemy with such force that the Bulgar left reeled backward from the impact. A violent melee ensued, joined soon after commencing by Aplakes's Thracian thematic units. Fighting on their home soil and bolstered by a long period of training, the two Balkan thematic forces were the least demoralized Byzantine troops on the field, and their determined fighting steadily pushed back their outnumbered foes. With the left of Krum's front line wavering and showing signs of breaking, it was time for Michael and Leo to support Aplakes by attacking the Bulgars' center and right, thus possibly clinching a decisive victory or, at least, driving Krum's forces from imperial territory. To Aplakes's dismay and Krum's good fortune, those blows never materialized.<sup>80</sup>

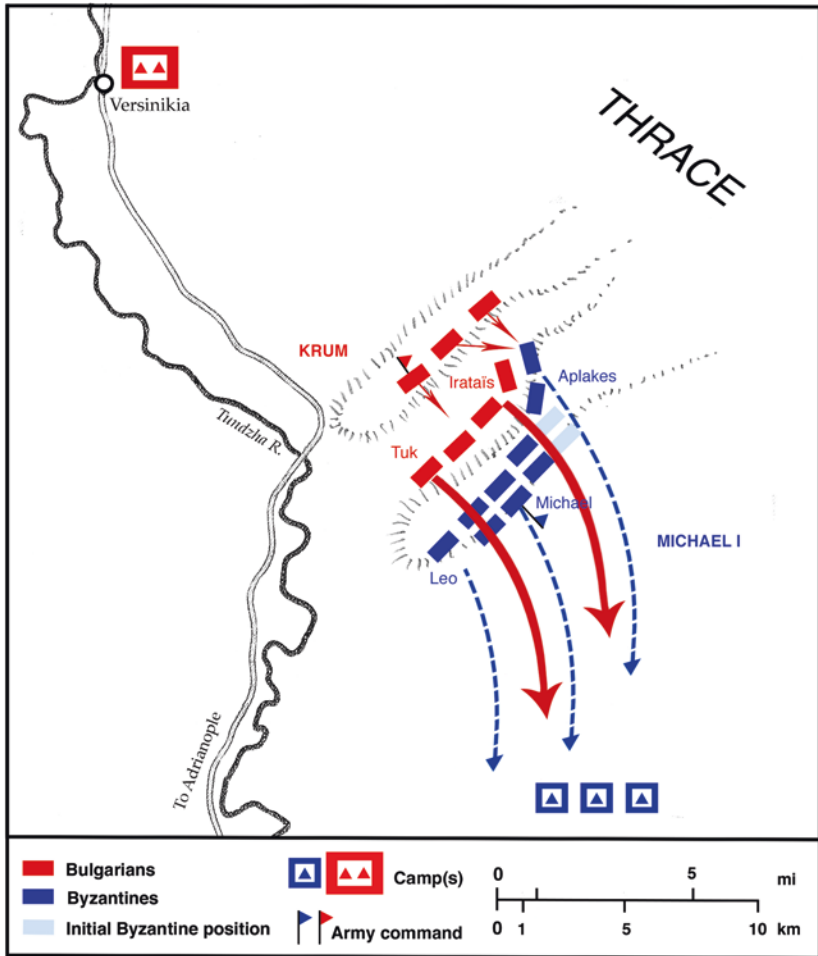


Fig. 3.3 Battle of Versinikia, 22 June 813

Michael watched the fighting unfold from his position on the ridge at the center of the imperial line. He watched and did nothing. More a spectator than a commander, Michael failed to issue attack orders either to his troops in the center or to Leo's wing. Why the emperor was so reticent to engage in the combat remains a matter of conjecture. Perhaps the nightmare of Vürbitsa had emotionally and mentally scarred

him. Possibly he feared both Aplakes and Leo as potential political rivals and was overly concerned about their gaining credit for any victory that would undermine his retention of the imperial throne. Maybe he simply was militarily incompetent and could not comprehend the tactical necessities of battle after fighting began. Whatever the reason, at the crucial stage of the battle, Michael proved indecisive and inactive, and the Byzantine center and left remained inert on the ridge.

Meanwhile, Krum, observing the inactivity of the Byzantine forces not yet engaged, began reinforcing his beleaguered left wing. Units from his second line joined others from the front line in attempts to stabilize the dangerous situation caused by Aplakes's assault. Still no new Byzantine contingents joined the combat. Bulgar light cavalry harried the enemy left flank with arrows from a distance but elicited no concerted response. Instead, for no apparent tactical reason, the Anatolian troops under Leo's command suddenly began making for the rear. What began as a messy withdrawal quickly degenerated into a disorganized rout, the change possibly aided by flights of arrows poured into the demoralized Anatolians by Bulgar horse archers hovering on the flank.

With the Byzantine left wing abandoning the field and the center tagmatic troops standing stationary and growing disheartened by the actions that they witnessed to their front and left, Krum increased the pressure on Aplakes and his men until the situation on the Bulgar left was completely transformed. What began with the Byzantines appearing near-victorious became a massacre of the attacking imperial troops by the Bulgars. Aplakes, who was an able and brave officer, fought to the death, as did many of his men, while increasing numbers of Bulgars closed in around the rest. At that point, the tagmatic troops on the ridge, unnerved by the sight of the army's disintegration and defeat, turned and fled after the Anatolians without having participated in the combat. When the survivors among Aplakes's men realized that no support was coming from the rest of the army, they too turned and ran for their lives. Michael, his bodyguards, and a few courtiers were swept up by the fugitives escaping the destruction of the Balkan thematic units in the valley. From start to finish, the battle had lasted little more than an hour.

At first, Krum could not believe that the large imperial army had fled the battlefield. He thought that the enemy actions were a planned feigned retreat to lure him into a trap set to the rear of their original position on the ridge. Only after he cautiously crested that rise, saw the enemy fleeing headlong to the south, and received reports that the

fugitives were casting away their arms and armor and had abandoned their camp and baggage train, did he order a pursuit of the defeated army. Some of the refugees from the shattered Balkan thematic forces sought shelter in the few small local forts or headed for Adrianople, while the rest, including the tagmatic troops and those from the Anatolian themes, rushed on toward Constantinople. So jittery were they that, it was said, the sounds of friendly forces out of sight to the rear were enough to send any of them instantly into panicked flight. They need not have been so fearful. Despite Krum's desire for a close pursuit, his men found the abandoned spoils in the enemy camp and strewn in the wake of flight far more attractive than chasing after the refugees who had discarded them. Except for those troops who sought safety in the local forts, which were captured by the Bulgars within a week of the battle, the majority of the Byzantine army escaped with heavy losses in materiel but a relatively small number of casualties, perhaps 2000–3000 men, and those were concentrated among Aplakes's battered Balkan contingents.<sup>81</sup>

Most studies of the Versinikia battle attribute treachery on the part of Leo the Armenian and his commanders as the only possible reason for the defeat and rout of the Byzantines by Krum's outnumbered Bulgars. According to this interpretation, Leo and his commanders intentionally withdrew their wing from the battle at the critical moment, causing the subsequent loss of the battle, expressly to discredit and then overthrow Michael and replace him with Leo. Some scholars have even posited that Leo struck a clandestine, pre-battle arrangement with Krum to ensure that the Anatolians were given time to vacate the battlefield before the Bulgar ruler ordered a serious counterattack and pursuit. The scholarly perspective holding Leo suspect as a traitor mirrors a view that apparently was widespread among Byzantine contemporaries. Most sources for the Versinikia battle implied or overtly expressed such suspicion, although they often provided ambiguous, conflicting accounts of Leo's actions, both treasonous and heroic, during the engagement.<sup>82</sup>

Quite possibly no overt treachery was responsible for the collapse of the Byzantines' Anatolian wing at Versinikia. Michael's inept leadership may have been the root cause of the Anatolians' flight. His mobilization of largely untrained recruits and border guard units usually not mustered for general campaigns almost guaranteed certain levels of indiscipline and disgruntlement among their ranks. These factors were magnified by over two months of either inactivity or purposeless maneuvering



during a period when most of the Anatolians would otherwise have been occupied with necessary agricultural activities had they remained at home. Added to that situation were the distrust and lack of respect for Michael as a commander shared by the men and officers, the perception of the May solar eclipse as a bad omen, and the two weeks of inconclusive maneuvering in the presence of the Bulgar enemy during June. By the time battle was joined, treachery was not needed to explain the total lack of commitment of the army's Anatolian wing to either the emperor or the engagement, and only the slightest pretext, such as arrow flights from Bulgar flank guards, was needed to convince the disheartened eastern troops to quit the field, resulting in the army's defeat and flight from the battlefield.<sup>83</sup>

Krum spent two weeks after the Versinikia battle mopping up the Byzantine troops who had sought refuge in local forts and finding replacements for his own combat casualties. He also oversaw the investment of Adrianople, which was filled with refugees from the battle, placing his brother in command of the siege. Once his rear was secured and Adrianople besieged, Krum, determined to follow his victory by striking at his enemy's heart, led the reinforced main Bulgar army against Constantinople in the knowledge that, so precipitous had been the Byzantine flight, no organized forces stood between him and the imperial capital.

By the time the Bulgars arrived before Constantinople on 17 July, Michael had been compelled to abdicate the imperial throne. Six days earlier, amid a great outward show of reticence, Leo V the Armenian had acceded to the entreaties of the military commanders, the Orthodox church leadership, and the heads of the former political opposition and agreed to rule in Michael's stead. With a reputation as a competent theme commander, Leo enjoyed the loyalty of the Anatolian and the trust of the Balkan thematic troops who were regrouping behind the safety of the capital's formidable walls. Aware of the approaching Bulgar army, Leo spent those six days prior to their arrival inspecting the state of the city's walled defenses and rallying the spirits of his men. Despite the fear engendered among the Byzantines by Krum's name and his string of stunning victories, Leo realized that the Bulgars possessed no navy and were not as numerous as previous Avar or Arab invaders who had threatened the city. He placed his trust in his own leadership skills and, most important, the strength of Constantinople's land fortifications. As was soon demonstrated, Leo's faith in the latter was not misplaced.

Shortly after arriving from Adrianople, Krum marched his army along the length of Constantinople's land walls between the Gate of Kharisios (m: Edirne *kapı*) in the north and the Golden Gate in the south, near the point where the ramparts met the Sea of Marmara. Remaining outside of effective bow-shot range, the Bulgars put on a boisterous display of ferocity, screaming war cries and brandishing weapons at the disheartened defenders who gazed down on them from behind the walls' protection. In the field outside the Golden Gate, where Constantine V's Bulgar prisoners had been butchered in 763, Krum mustered his army and staged a series of gruesome pagan blood sacrifices of assorted animals and, some said, human captives in ceremonies intended to imbed the image of Bulgar savagery in the minds of the on-looking Christian Byzantines, who were both duly frightened and outraged by the gory antics. Observing further ritual displays soon thereafter, they were befuddled by Krum wading into the Sea of Marmara, ceremoniously washing his feet, and splashing water back at his troops assembled on the shore in some sort of benediction, and repulsed by Krum being adulated as he strode proudly between lines of his wailing and prostrating concubines brought forward for the occasion while his men cheered and joined in the acclamation of their leader. As a culminating gesture, Krum sent a humiliating notice into the city demanding that his spear be planted in the Golden Gate as a symbol of his dominance.<sup>84</sup>

Krum must have known that he could not breach Constantinople's defense walls with the armament at hand, and that, without a navy, he could never starve the city into surrender by a siege. When the bravado of his parades, sacrifices, rituals, and blustering demands failed to intimidate the Byzantines into submission, there was little recourse but to pillage imperial lands while their forces were penned in the capital and negotiate with Leo in hopes of gaining as much benefit as possible from the chastened empire. After Leo rejected his demand regarding the spear, Krum was forced to settle in and call for talks. He had a protective ditch dug between his army's encampment on the hill of Kosmidion (m: Eyüp), close to the Golden Horn, and the city's wall protecting the northern, Blakhernai district to guard against Byzantine sorties while he sent Leo a demand for a large annual tribute payable in gold, robes, and young women for his harem of concubines.<sup>85</sup>

Leo welcomed Krum's initiative. The Bulgar's terms were less onerous than those he had proposed in 812, probably reflecting the de facto military stalemate caused by the strength of the imperial capital's walled

defenses. Moreover, the situation provided him with an opportunity to end the currently disastrous Bulgar threat by eliminating the Bulgars' charismatic ruler. Responding to the *han's* demands, the emperor dispatched a missive proposing that they meet the following day (probably 19 July) for face-to-face discussions at a location near the right bank of the Golden Horn, just outside the city wall lying closest to Krum's camp. Both were to arrive at a specific time with three unarmed retainers each, Leo's party by boat and Krum's by horseback. Krum readily agreed, ignorant of the fact that the emperor had no intention of negotiating but actually was setting a trap for his assassination. That night, Leo ordered three expert military archers to hide themselves in an outlying building close to the location set for the conference. At a specified signal from someone in Leo's entourage, they were to attack and kill the Bulgar ruler and his attendants.<sup>86</sup>

On the day of the meeting, Krum arrived at the appointed location with three unarmed companions: His brother-in-law Constantine Patzikos, a Greek who had deserted to Bulgar service over a decade earlier and subsequently wedded Krum's sister; his young nephew, Patzikos's son by that marriage; and his *kavhan*, or second-in-command. The *kavhan* was present to represent the clan leadership at the talks. The bilingual Constantine was to serve as translator, while his adolescent son was honored with the task of livery boy minding the horses during the conference. Three other guardsmen who had accompanied the party out of camp remained behind at a good distance from the meeting site.

Krum and his retainers dismounted when Leo's barge drew up to the bank of the Golden Horn and he seated himself close to his nephew, who held his horse. The emperor's party disembarked and approached the Bulgars, calling out the standard introductory niceties. Then Krum noticed one of Leo's entourage make a gesture to his head—either covering his face or removing his hat—that the Bulgar ruler considered insulting or suspiciously out of place. Krum jumped to his feet and turned for his horse. As he did so, Leo's three concealed ambushers broke their cover. Suddenly, the Byzantines who were gathered on the walls to observe the events began prematurely shouting, "The Cross has triumphed!" Arrows flew as Krum swiftly mounted his horse while his three companions, still on foot, attempted to shield him as best they could. The Bulgar *kavhan* was shot dead, but Krum managed to gallop to safety, avoiding the arrows repeatedly unleashed after him by the archers. A squad of imperial troops quickly arrived from the Blakhernai Gate

and made prisoners of Patzikos and his son. Despite capturing two members of the Bulgar princely family and killing a high Bulgar official, Leo's ambush had failed.<sup>87</sup>

Krum returned to his camp slightly injured from being grazed by one of the arrows and utterly enraged over Leo's treachery. Never again would he consider accepting any imperial peace initiative. He was determined that the war would end only on terms he would impose as victor on a defeated enemy. In the meantime, the empire would be made to pay a price for its ruler's perfidy.

The day after the failed assassination attempt, Krum dispatched bands of Bulgar troops to lay waste the suburbs of Constantinople lying west of the city's walls, from the shore of the Marmara, as far west as Rhegion (m: Küçük Çekmece), to the right bank of the Golden Horn. They were ordered to spare nothing so an orgy of death and destruction ensued. Palaces, villas, churches, monasteries, and villages were devastated. All living things not associated with the Bulgar host—men, women, children, and animals—were put to the sword. On the following day Bulgar detachments moved north of the Golden Horn and repeated their ravages in the rich suburbs located there. The Bulgars plowed through the wealthy settlement of Sykai (m: Galata) and nearby communities lining the Horn's left bank, wreaking havoc and destruction on a scale never before experienced by the capital's inhabitants. Large, richly endowed churches were looted and destroyed, along with numerous villas belonging to the imperial family and the capital's patrician elite. When the Bulgars finished devastating those suburbs, they continued their rampage northward for some distance along the European shore of the Bosphoros, inflicting similar treatment on everything and every person they encountered. Finally, they turned inland to the west and worked their way back to the main Bulgar encampment, leaving a swath of total destruction in their wake.<sup>88</sup>

In those days of unrestrained Bulgar mayhem, Byzantium paid a heavy price for Leo's botched attempt on Krum's life in terms of lives lost, property ravaged or destroyed, and valuables pillaged. Among a number of richly endowed suburban palaces sacked were the imperial establishments of the Hebdomon and St. Mamas. The former, lying on the Marmara coast (at m: Bakırköy) and encompassing an extensive complex of civic and religious structures, traditionally played an important role in imperial coronations and victory celebrations. Its despoliation was both a material and symbolic blow to imperial power.<sup>89</sup> The palace

of St. Mamas was situated on the European shore of the Bosphoros (in either the Beşiktaş or Dolmabahçe quarters of modern Istanbul) and was one of the most splendid of the emperor's suburban residences. There the Bulgars pulled down and carted off marble columns and their ornamented capitals before setting the main palace and its outbuildings alight. In the attached racetrack (hippodrome), they removed a number of marble statues as well as the bronze figures of a bear and a lion. An ornamental dragon was stripped from the palace cistern, along with lengths of lead pipe. All the plunder was loaded onto wagons and hauled back to Pliska for use in Krum's ongoing restoration project at his capital.<sup>90</sup>

Unable to overcome Constantinople's walled defenses, and having reduced the imperial capital's immediate environs to a wasteland, Krum had little choice but to withdraw and return northward, where his brother's siege of Adrianople continued to drag on. His thirst for revenge still not slaked, however, Krum led his troops on an indirect route heading westward, following the northern coast of the Sea of Marmara, and then northward, up the course of the Maritsa River, to Adrianople, inflicting as much damage on imperial territory in southern Thrace as possible in the process.

Moving along the *Via Egnatia*, the Bulgars destroyed virtually every town and fort in their path, beginning with the fortress of Athyra (located near m: Büyük Çekmese) and its great stone bridge. Next fell the walled town of Selymbria, where the citadel and churches were razed and the rest of the city reduced to ashes. The nearby fort of Daonion (m: Eskiereğli), standing just beyond the Long Walls, was leveled and, although the fortress walls of Herakleia (m: Marmaraeğlisi) saved that coastal town from destruction, its suburbs and harbor were burned. Continuing westward, Krum's Bulgars captured and demolished the fortress of Rhaidestos (or Rodosto; m: Tekirdağ), after which they followed the road inland a short way to the fort of Panion, whose large garrison thwarted their efforts. Rebuffed, the Bulgars took and destroyed the nearby fort of Apros before settling into camp for 10 days to raid the surrounding countryside. While encamped, they hunted down thousands of Thracian peasants who had fled with their livestock for safety into the hills, slaying the men and taking the women, children, and animals captive for transport back to Bulgar territory.<sup>91</sup>

After making a brief incursion into the Thracian Khersonese, Krum's army turned and followed the Maritsa River northward, ravaging every

settlement along its course, until arriving at Adrianople sometime around 20 August. There, after over a month of hardship, the starving Byzantine garrison and inhabitants still held out against the efforts of Krum's brother. Once Krum and the main Bulgar army arrived instead of an imperial relief force, and after the *han's* former Byzantine engineers began applying the siege artillery that had proven so useful in reducing the forts of southern and western Thrace, the desperate population of the encircled city bowed to the inevitable and surrendered before the month was out. Some 10,000 men (not counting the women and children, who may have increased the total number to some 40,000), were captured and deported by Krum north of the Danube to the region of southern Bessarabia, where they were resettled as soldier-farmer border guards on the Bulgar state's extreme northeastern frontier facing the Khazars. Once the captive inhabitants were removed, the Bulgars pillaged and burned the deserted city. Considering the campaign successfully closed, Krum withdrew his forces behind his north Thracian border. When Leo soon thereafter sued for peace, the Bulgar *han* rejected the offer out of hand. The campaign may have ended but the war continued.<sup>92</sup>

Throughout the course of the July–August Bulgar incursion, Leo made no efforts to advance his forces outside the capital's protective walls. The imperial army was too demoralized, under trained, under equipped, and undermanned for him to risk offensive operations. Additionally, he had so recently attained the throne that strong domestic support for his rule had yet to be solidified, and there were questions regarding his view of Orthodoxy. Those factors helped explain his resort to chicanery and assassination as well as his apparent inactivity behind Constantinople's walls while the Bulgars ravaged at will. Krum, aware that Leo's military and domestic situations were unstable, decided to take advantage of his enemy's weakness and launched a substantial winter raid against Byzantium for a second consecutive year.

In January 814, which was unusually mild and dry for the season, Krum sent a large force of armored cavalry (said to have numbered 30,000) to ravage east-central Thrace, which had been spared during the previous summer's campaign, and to round up captives and supplies. Arkadiopolis (m: Lüleburgaz), capital of the Thracian theme and lying some 56 miles (91 km) southeast of Adrianople, was sacked and burned, as was Bizya (m: Vizye). Forging the low-running Rhexina (m: Ergene) River, the Bulgar raiders continued their depredations to

the southeast until they had gathered a few thousand captives (exaggeratedly numbered at 50,000 in the sources), numerous wagons filled with rich plunder, and herds of livestock. By the time they turned to head home, however, heavy rains developed, transforming the once easily forded Rhexina into an impassable torrent and stranding the Bulgars in enemy territory. For 15 days they remained cut off from retreat and outnumbered by their captives, but Leo, considering offensive action still too risky, did not attack them. When the rains slackened and the water began to recede, the Bulgars forced their prisoners to build a wooden bridge over the river, by which they all crossed and returned to Bulgar territory with no further incident. The winter raid crippled the empire's Thracian theme as the summer rampage had the Macedonian, and it netted Krum not only captives in the thousands but large herds of livestock and valuable quantities of plunder—resources needed to support his planned next major military offensive.<sup>93</sup>

Krum was determined to inflict a decisive defeat on Byzantium when campaigning season opened in 814, a defeat that would assure Bulgar dominance over the eastern and central Balkans while reducing Byzantium's presence to the peninsula's southern regions or eliminating it altogether. Because the empire possessed reserve resources in Anatolia that Krum was helpless to obstruct, simple battlefield victories could not accomplish that goal. Nor could unrestrained pillaging of imperial Balkan territories, no matter how widespread or thorough, achieve the desired end. The only action that could bring the empire to its knees was the capture of its capital, Constantinople. Without a navy, however, the city's defenses were exceedingly difficult to overcome, as Krum well knew. Having no fleet, he needed an ally who could furnish one. Unfortunately, the Arabs, who were the only potential power near enough to help in that regard, were hampered by internal civil strife and in no position to render assistance. Krum thus faced a lone option—the daunting task of breaching the city's land walls and taking it by storm.

Throughout winter 813–814 Krum gathered a large army by conscripting all of his state's Bulgar and Slavic men of military age, mobilizing all of his Pannonian Avar clients, and enlisting additional troops from allied *Sklaviniai*, some of which lay as far west as Pannonia. The size of his force by early spring 814 is unknown but it certainly exceeded any that he commanded in the past. The Bulgar ruler realized that sheer numbers could do little against the fearsome walled defenses of Constantinople. He needed siege engines a great deal larger and

stronger than any that he had deployed to date, and more of them, to have a chance at overcoming those obstacles. The former Byzantine engineers in his employ were ordered to produce the necessary machines and tools, and they industriously set to work manufacturing them. A large number of carts clad in iron were built to haul the equipment to the siege and then serve as protection for the Bulgar besiegers against fire and missile attack from the defenders. Thousands of oxen were gathered and penned in preparation for pulling the carts and engines to the siege site.<sup>94</sup>

News of the Bulgar preparations for the looming assault reached the Byzantine imperial court. A competent general, Leo concluded that Krum would concentrate his efforts on attacking the stretch of wall defending the Blakhernai district of the capital. There the lay of the land rendered the wall the weakest in the chain of land defenses. Built by Emperor Herakleios in 627, the wall ran from the terminus of the triple Theodosian walls on the hilltop at Blakhernai down the slope to the Golden Horn. Its steep downhill course precluded a fronting moat, and the circumstances of its construction in the wake of the Avar-Slav siege made only a single wall with interspersed defense towers possible. Any experienced commander would recognize the logic of assaulting a single line of walls with no protective moat rather than a triple line of walls fronted by a wide moat. Leo probably also thought that Krum would find assaulting the wall before which the failed attempt on his life had taken place symbolically irresistible.

Leo ordered a new wall constructed in front of the existing Herakleian single wall guarding Blakhernai in an effort to double its defensive posture for the upcoming ordeal. Joining the inner wall on north and south, Leo's new erection, strengthened by four towers, formed a citadel of sorts through which the Blakhernai Gate passed. Because of its hasty construction, the new wall was thinner and less well built than the older one to its rear. Work on the wall was still in progress when the traditional opening of campaigning season arrived with the month of April. Although Leo was gathering his own forces in Constantinople and the wall was progressing, the emperor made a bid for additional, outside assistance against the expected Bulgar onslaught by dispatching a delegation to the Frank western emperor in what ultimately proved an unsuccessful attempt to convince him to attack Krum's rear in Pannonia. In the end, Leo's defensive efforts, both successful and unsuccessful, proved unnecessary.<sup>95</sup>



By early April 814 Krum was overseeing the final stages of preparations for his attack on Constantinople when, on 13 April (Holy Thursday on the Christian calendar), he suffered a massive cerebral hemorrhage. Blood gushed from every orifice in his head and the Bulgar ruler dropped dead. On learning of the *han's* death, the Byzantines heaved a collective sigh of relief. Leo immediately claimed credit by alleging that Krum had ultimately succumbed to wounds inflicted by his hidden ambushers the previous July but few gave much credence to his assertion. Most credited divine intervention since Krum's death occurred during the Christian Holy Week. As for the Bulgars, their leader's demise halted the planned campaign against the empire's capital. There followed a short period of instability, encompassing less than a year, during which time three individuals of uncertain provenance—Dukum, Ditseng, and Tsuk (or Tuk)—vied for the throne, until Krum's son Omurtag (814/815–831) succeeded in solidifying his right of succession.<sup>96</sup>

Throughout the rest of 814 and for much of the following year, neither the Bulgars nor the Byzantines were in any position to initiate major offensive actions against one another. The unsettling initial instability surrounding the Bulgar throne's inheritance forced Omurtag, the ultimate successor, to spend that time assuaging his unruly clan leaders, cementing the loyalty of his state's native Bulgar and Slavic troops, and retaining the support of allied *Skлавиниати*. In efforts to rally the pagan Bulgar and Slavic leaders behind his leadership, eliminate or reduce the influence of former Byzantine leaders within Bulgar governing circles whose loyalty was potentially suspect, and eradicate a possible threat to the Bulgars' native religious underpinning of the state's social and political order posed by the significant number of Christians resettled on Bulgar territory by Krum, Omurtag initiated a targeted anti-Christian persecution during the opening years of his reign. Those efforts did little to stem the spread of Christianity among his subjects.<sup>97</sup>

In Byzantium, Leo's attempts to reestablish Iconoclasm as official Orthodox church dogma, begun in late 814, ignited a firestorm of disruption within leading political and religious circles. Until Leo brought the patriarch and the Orthodox ecclesiastical leadership into line with his Iconoclastic views, he could not devote full attention to the Bulgars. He, along with many of his military commanders and most of the Anatolian troops, contended that the string of defeats suffered at the hands of the pagan Bulgars was God's punishment of a Christian empire that had

slipped into idolatry through image worship. Once that “truth” was recognized by the church and rectified, the emperor believed, the empire could proceed against the pagan Bulgars with faith in victory. In any event, rebuilding the Balkan thematic forces concentrated in or near the capital needed completion, and the morale of the entire army was not yet fully restored. Leo, therefore, felt constrained to bide his time before initiating offensive action against the Bulgars.<sup>98</sup>

Omurtag’s situation stabilized before that of Leo. During the period of military inactivity following Krum’s death, most of the imperial refugees from the Thracian and Macedonian themes were resettled back on their abandoned homesteads and began to rebuild their lives working the land. By fall 815 life in those imperial territories had nearly returned to normal. Their recovery proved a tempting opportunity for Omurtag to exhibit his martial talents to his domestic leadership. He entered imperial territory at the head of a large raiding expedition and swept through Byzantine Thrace, meeting little opposition, plundering crops and domiciles, and taking numerous captives and livestock. Still unprepared to counter the Bulgars militarily, Leo sued for peace but Omurtag rejected his offer. The Bulgar *han* probably relished rebuffing the emperor’s peace initiative, which, in conjunction with the successfully conducted major raid, cemented his reputation as a hardened warrior-leader and his position of central authority in the Bulgar state.<sup>99</sup>

As winter 815–816 arrived, Omurtag settled into enjoy his position of uncontested Bulgar ruler. There was no smugness for Leo. He worked hard preparing his troops for an early spring 816 military offensive against the Bulgars aimed at domestically securing the moral victory of his Iconoclastic beliefs. The new wall reinforcing the Blakhernai land defenses finally was completed (after an apparent cessation of construction following Krum’s death), and a large force of tagmatic and reconstituted thematic units was mustered. Leo led his renewed army on a swift march up the Black Sea coastal road to Mesembria in early March. A bit north of the ruined city, just south of where the Balkan Mountains ended in the sea at Cape Emine, Leo established a fortified camp close to the Bulgar state’s border, stocking it full of supplies provided by his imperial fleet, which rode at anchor close off the coast. So unexpected and rapid had been the Byzantine advance that Omurtag had little time to assemble a force to meet Leo’s thrust. Those troops that he succeeded in mustering were rushed to the locale of Mesembria and settled into camp near that of the Byzantines, their commanders (apparently

Omurtag himself was not present) unwilling to initiate action against the heavily entrenched imperial army.

For several days the two forces faced each other in a standoff favoring the Byzantines—the area south of Cape Emine was uncultivated and barren and the imperial forces enjoyed copious provisions while the Bulgars soon exhausted those they brought with them. By early April Leo judged the time right for striking the suffering enemy force. Having observed a hill lying on the flank and rear of the Bulgar encampment, he led his tagmatic troops to a concealed position behind it under cover of night without informing the rest of his force's commanders or men. When dawn broke the following day, both his own thematic troops in the camp and the Bulgar scouts lurking in the vicinity noticed that he and his elite units were missing. Consternation spread through the imperial encampment and overconfidence flooded that of the Bulgars, who felt certain of an easy victory in fighting planned for the next day and so were lax in maintaining their camp's security. Leo sent word to his thematic commanders during the night informing them of his hidden presence and ordering them to attack the enemy camp at sunrise, the lateness of his missive ensuring that there would be no time for word of his plan to reach the Bulgars before action began.

When the Byzantines attacked early next morning, the Bulgars were caught completely by surprise, most of them still asleep and unable to arm themselves before the enemy was upon them. Just as Krum's troops had smashed the unprepared Byzantines in their camp on the Struma seven years earlier, so now the imperial troops returned the blow in kind. Many Bulgars were either killed or captured, and those who escaped turned to flee, only to be crushed by Leo's tagmatic contingent that now emerged from ambush and annihilated the stunned survivors of the initial assault. Few Bulgars in the camp escaped. Leo, determined to wring as much advantage out of the victory as possible, quickly led a sharp, brief strike over the nearby Balkan Mountains and into Bulgar Dobrudzha, his raiders plundering the land and killing whomever fell into their hands, including children, before returning to imperial territory. Long after the battle, local Bulgarians called the hill behind which Leo concealed his ambushers "Leo's Hill." Back in Constantinople, Leo celebrated his victory and claimed that God had granted a favorable sign for the reestablishment of Iconoclasm as Orthodoxy's official dogma.<sup>100</sup>

The battle of "Leo's Hill" definitively closed the opening phase of what would become the two-century long hegemonic wars between the

Bulgars and Byzantines in the Balkans. The destruction of his force near Mesembria convinced Omurtag that Byzantium could not be defeated so long as its capital remained immune to Bulgar conquest, and, as things stood, he lacked the wherewithal to accomplish that feat. The defeat probably cost the new *han* some support among the state's *boili* and weakened ties with his Pannonian Avar clients and allied *Sklaviniai*. He could ill afford to continue warfare against the obviously recovering empire. Omurtag needed to end the conflict in a manner preserving as much of the recently won territories in Thrace and the Sofia Basin as possible while, at the same time, creating peaceful coexistence with the empire along whatever frontier that could be mutually agreed upon. Such a peace was needed to stabilize once again his leadership authority by providing him with the unhindered opportunity to rally his warriors for military efforts into the central and northwestern Balkans against relatively weaker *Sklaviniai* and away from the lands of the reviving empire. A secure peace with Byzantium could free Omurtag to capture most of the Balkans north of the empire's possessions in southern Thrace, southern Macedonia, and Greece while solidifying his central authority. To that end, he dispatched an embassy to Leo shortly after the battle requesting peace talks.

Led by Omurtag's *kavhan*, the Bulgar delegation succeeded in hammering out a peace settlement with Leo that was ratified by both sides sometime before the close of 816. Although no mention of its terms has been found in extant Byzantine sources, a summary of the eleven articles that it contained was carved into an extant marble column that initially was erected in Omurtag's capital at Pliska. Damage over the centuries has reduced the number of presently surviving treaty articles on the column to four.<sup>101</sup>

The peace was to hold for 30 years but required renewal at 10-year intervals. The first surviving article dealt with the common border, which was to run generally southwestward across northern Thrace from Debeltos to the Bulgar fort of Konstantsiya, located on the Maritsa River close to the Diagonal highway. From Konstantsiya, the border turned sharply northwestward to the Balkan Mountains, whose main chain and Sredna Gora foothills constituted a wide border zone running to the west and encompassing the Sofia Basin. The Black Sea coast from (and including) Debeltos southward was returned to Byzantine control. In effect, except for this latter provision, the empire recognized its loss of all territories gained by the Bulgars in Thrace and the Sofia Basin since 780.

The Bulgars were permitted to erect a strongly fortified earthwork palisade, stretching from just northwest of Debeltos to Konstantisiya and later known as the Great Fence, to protect their north Thracian border against any future Byzantine incursion.<sup>102</sup>

The second and third known treaty articles dealt with the Slavs in the Byzantine Empire at the time, demonstrating that Slavic affairs of any kind had become matters of official Bulgar interest by Omurtag's time. One extant article required the imperial government to cease resettling Slavs from Thrace and southern Macedonia to distant regions of the empire. The other treated the Slavs of Western Thrace and southern Macedonia who originally were not imperial inhabitants but had been brought under Byzantine control by Eirene and Constantine VI after 780. They were to be returned to their native home territories and granted independence from the empire, thus once again severing direct overland contact between Byzantine Thessaloniki and Byzantine Thrace. The fourth existing article dealt with the Christian prisoners and defectors who had remained in Bulgar lands since the time of Krum's campaigns. Captive imperial officers were to be returned in exchange for ransom while rank-and-file troopers were to be exchanged for common Bulgar prisoners on a "man-for-man" basis. A fifth article treating high ranking Byzantine defectors who actively fought on the Bulgars' side during Krum's campaigns, although alluded to in the extant inscription, has not survived.<sup>103</sup>

Although there would be some minor border incidents during the ensuing 30 years, the 816 Bulgar-Byzantine treaty held until its terminal date of 846. Its consequences for the Bulgars were extensive and generally positive. Most of Krum's territorial acquisitions in northern Thrace and the Sofia Basin were preserved for the Bulgar state, which now was a power in Europe ranking with Byzantium and the Frank Empire, both of which shared borders with the Bulgars. Byzantine expansion in the Balkans, especially its efforts at incorporating the territories of the *Sklaviniai* in Western Thrace and Macedonia, was stopped, and imperial territories were restricted to southern Thrace, the region surrounding Thessaloniki, and Greece. The Bulgar state was left in a position to consolidate its internal affairs free of Byzantine interference and to commence its own systematic territorial expansion into the central, western, and northwestern Balkans. Such was the legacy of Krum's first wars against Byzantium for Balkan hegemony.

## NOTES

1. Treadgold, *Byzantine Revival*, 71–75, 124; Sophoulis, 160f; P. Koledarov, “Obrazuvane na tema ‘Makedoniya’ v Trakiya,” *III* 21 (1970): 219–243; Fine, *ibid.*, 79–80.
2. For Nikephoros’s reign, see P.E. Niavis, *The Reign of the Byzantine Emperor Nicephorus I* (Athens, 1987).
3. P. Lemerle, “La chronique improprement dite de Monemvasie: Le contexte historique et légendaire,” *REB* 21 (1963): 5–49; Treadgold, *op. cit.*, 136–138; Fine, *op. cit.*, 80f; Toynbee, 95–96, 261f. See *DAI*, chap. 49, for the 807 Slav revolt.
4. Treadgold, *ibid.*, 146–152; Sophoulis, 176–179.
5. Einhard, *The Life of Charlemagne*, S.E. Turner, trans (Ann Arbor, MI, 1960), 37–39; C.R. Bowlus, *Franks, Moravians and Magyars: The Struggle for the Middle Danube* (Philadelphia, PA, 1995), 46–60; Curta, *Southeastern Europe*, 92f.
6. Suidas, *Lexicon*, entry “Bulgars,” given in *Voices*, 23–24; Runciman, *A History*, 50–51. Sophoulis, 180 and n.
7. For Krum’s biography, see: Andreev, 29f; D. Manov, *Han Krum. Istoricheski ocherk* (Sofia, 1964); N.P. Blagoev, “Knyaz Krum,” *GSUyuf* 19 (1924): 1–91; V. Popov, “Han Krum,” *VISh*, no. 1 (1982): 190–200; Fine, *Early Medieval Balkans*, 94; A. Nikolov, “Han Krum vuv vizantiiskata traditsiya: Strashni sluhove dezinformatsiya i politicheskata propaganda,” *SB* 27 (Sofia, 2009), 107–116.
8. Nicholas Mystikos, *Letters. Greek Text and English Translation* [hereafter, *Nich. Myst., Letters*], R.J. Jenkins and L.G. Westerink, eds. and trans. (Washington, DC, 1973), #10, referred to the Bulgar Krum dynasty’s “Avar” origins.
9. I. Boba, “The Pannonian Onogurs, Khan Krum and the Formation of the Bulgarian and Hungarian Polities,” *BHR* 11, no. 1 (1983): 73–76.
10. Bozhilov and Gyuzelev, 126–127; Sophoulis, 181–182, and 182 n.
11. Suidas, *Lexicon*, entry “Bulgars,” in *Voices*, 24; Bozhilov and Gyuzelev, 126; Fine, *Early Medieval Balkans*, 94.
12. Fine, *ibid.*, 94–95; Zlatarski, *IBDSV* 1/1, 322–323; Mutafchiev, *IBN* 1, 133–134.
13. Runciman, *A History*, 51; Boba, “The Pannonian Onogurs.”
14. Runciman, *ibid.*, 51–52, 52 n.
15. Sophoulis, 181–183, 181 n, and 182 n; Bozhilov and Gyuzelev, 126–127.
16. Theophanes, 663; Treadgold, *Byzantine Revival*, 146–147; Sophoulis, 184.
17. Theophanes, *ibid.*; Treadgold, *ibid.*, 148–149; Sophoulis, 185–187.

18. Most modern scholars accept a late summer 808 date for Krum's initial counterstroke based on an argument propounded by John Bury in his *ERE* (London 1912), 340 and n, and accepted by Zlatarski, *IBDSV* 1/1, 326–327. Treadgold, *ibid.*, 157, however, placed it in late winter or early spring 809 because of the role the Byzantine army payroll played in events. According to his *Byzantine State Finances*, 14–15, and 14 n, the annual rotational pay of Byzantine troops at the time always occurred during late winter or early spring, with troops of any given unit receiving theirs every three years. Liudprand of Cremona, in 949–950, described such practice in *Retribution (Antapodosis)* in *The Complete Works of Liudprand of Cremona* (hereafter, Liudprand, *Retribution*), P. Squatriti, trans. (Washington, DC, 2007), 200–202. Theophanes's chronicle entry for Krum's first offensive dated it to our years 808/809 and, since the Byzantine year began with September (our 1 September 808 = Byzantine 1 September 809), Treadgold's argument dating the affair to our year 809 is accepted by our study.
19. Most scholars place the Byzantine camp and the battle in the southern stretches of the Struma valley near Serres because a stone inscription (*Voices*, 9), in which Krum had carved a list of his military victories and fortresses taken, mentioned a battle near that town. It is just as likely that the citation referred to a victory won during the events of 812–813, when many of the others included in the list occurred.
20. Theophanes, 665, provided the figure for the total payroll. Treadgold, *Byzantine State Finances*, 12–31, 69–81, analyzed in detail the pay scales for Byzantine forces of the time. The figure of 12,000 total men was derived by Treadgold in his *Byzantine Revival*, 149, 157.
21. Theophanes, *ibid.*
22. Mutafchiev, *IBN* 1, 136; Treadgold, *Byzantine Revival*, 157.
23. Theophanes, *op. cit.*; M. Stancheva, "Sofia au moyen âge à la lumière de nouvelles études archéologiques," *Bb* 5 (Sofia, 1978), 211–228, for one such study.
24. Theophanes, 665–666; Zlatarski, *IBDSV* 1/1, 327–328; Bozhilov and Gyuzelev, 128; Runciman, *A History*, 54 n; Sophoulis, 190 and n.
25. Theophanes, 665.
26. Treadgold, *Byzantine Revival*, 158.
27. Theophanes, 666.
28. *Ibid.*, 667; Lemerle, "La chronique... Monemvasie," 29 n; Treadgold, *Byzantine Revival*, 160f; *id.*, *Byzantium and Its Army*, 67, table 2; Sophoulis, 191–192.
29. Sophoulis, 192–193.
30. Suidas, *Lexicon*, entry "Bulgars," given in *Voices*, 24; Zlatarski, *IBDSV* 1/1, 365–371.

31. Bozhilov and Gyuzelev, 139–140, and *IB* 2, 142–147, are examples of the typical Bulgarian reconstruction of Krum's centralizing institutional accomplishments. Fine, *Early Medieval Balkans*, 100–101, provided possible alternatives.
32. Treadgold, *Byzantine Revival*, 160–170; Sophoulis, 193–195. For the creation of the *Hikanatoi*, see “Chronicle of 811,” P. Stephenson, trans., in his “‘About the Emperor Nikephoros and How He Leaves His Bones in Bulgaria’: A Context for the Controversial ‘Chronicle of 811,’” *DOP* 60 (2006), 87–88.
33. Theophanes, 673.
34. “Chronicle of 811,” op. cit.; *ibid.*, 672–673; Luttwak, 178–179; Treadgold, op. cit., 170; *id.*, *Byzantium and Its Army*, 67, table 2; Haldon, *Byzantine Wars*, 71–73; Sophoulis, 195f; Bozhilov and Gyuzelev, 128; *IB* 5 VI, 81; *BVIF*, 166. Sophoulis, 197, proposed a Byzantine army strength in 811 of 15,000–25,000 men, based on studies by Haldon (*Warfare, State and Society*, 102–103) and Whittow (183f).
35. Theophanes, 672.
36. *Ibid.*, 673.
37. *Ibid.*, 672; “Chronicle of 811,” 88.
38. Treadgold, *Byzantine Revival*, 171 and n; Bozhilov and Gyuzelev, 128.
39. *BVIF*, 167. Haldon, in his *Byzantine Wars*, 73, incorrectly identified the primary pass used by the Byzantines as Shipka, which lies some 78 miles (126 km) due west of Rish Pass and opens onto the central rather than the eastern Danubian Plain on which Pliska sat. The most recent English-language study of the 811 campaign is Sophoulis, chap. 3. For Bulgarian studies of the 811 campaign of varying quality, see: *IB* 5 VI, 81–83; V. Avramov, *Voinata mezhdu Bŭlgariya i Vizantiya, 811 g. Pogromŭt na imperator Nikifor ot tsar Krum pri Madara* (Sofia, 1929); S. Nedev, *Voinata Bŭlgariya-Vizantiya 811* (Sofia, 1937); V. Beshevliev, “Krum i Nikifor,” *SB* 17 (Sofia, 1983), 17–26; D. Hristov, “Pobedata na han Krum vŭv voinata s Vizantiya prez 811 g.,” *Bŭlgariya 1300* 3, *Institutsii i dŭrzhavna traditsiya* (Sofia, 1983), 641–648; *id.*, “Voinata mezhdu Bŭlgariya i Vizantiya prez 811 g.,” *IVID* 4 (1967): 64–95; S.T. Nedev, “Razgromŭt na Nikifor I Gemik prez 811 g.,” *VISb*, no 1 (1977): 115–127; Iv. Venedikov, “Porazhenieto na imperator Nikifor v 811 godina,” *BVM* 8–10 (1939 [Offprint]): 1–19.
40. Theophanes, 673; “Chronicle of 811,” 88; Treadgold, *Byzantine Revival*, 172 n.
41. Theophanes, *ibid.*; “Chronicle of 811,” *ibid.*
42. Theophanes, *ibid.* (noted Krum's peace offer); “Chronicle of 811,” *ibid.* For the threshing machine story, see Michael the Syrian, *Chronique* 3, J.-B. Chabot, trans. and ed. (Paris, 1905), 17.



43. Our study's timeline and dating for events between the Byzantines' evacuation of Pliska and the campaign's conclusive battle follows the argument advanced in *BVIF*, 170.
44. Theophanes, op. cit.; "Chronicle of 811," 88–89. Sophoulis, 207–209, argued that no such breakdown in morale or division in the army's command occurred.
45. "Chronicle of 811," 89.
46. Ibid.; Sophoulis, 210; Luttwak, 179.
47. *BVIF*, 170.
48. "Chronicle of 811," op. cit. Theophanes, 673, had the emperor say to his commanders: "Even if we grow wings, let no one imagine he will escape his doom." Sophoulis, 210 n, considered Theophanes's quotation "untrue." For the palisade, see K. Stanev, "Dürvenata pregrada v staroplaninskiya prohod prez 811 g.," *Istoriya* 5–6 (2007): 1–4.
49. "Chronicle of 811," ibid.; Treadgold, *Byzantine Revival*, 172–173. Sophoulis, 209–210, postulated that the reason for the Byzantines' inactivity and lax force security was overconfidence. Standard Byzantine marching camp security was described in tenth-century military treatises: *Taktika*, const. 11; *Præcepta*, chap. V; *Anonymous Treatise*, chaps. 27–29; and *Campaign Organization*, chaps. 1–5 (with diagrams). Separate tagmatic and thematic camps followed standard procedure, as described in *Campaign Organization*, chap. 2.
50. *BVA*, 151.
51. Krum's battle plan has been extrapolated from the details of events given in: "Chronicle of 811," ibid.; Theophanes, 673.
52. *BVIF*, 170; Sophoulis, 214 n. Today much of the battlefield is covered by the man made Ticha Lake.
53. Theophanes, op. cit.; "Chronicle of 811," op. cit.
54. "Chronicle of 811," ibid.
55. Ibid., 90. The chronicle spoke of the prisoners being persecuted and killed for their Christian faith. That story most likely was a fictional creation of the chronicler (or his copyists) to heighten the negative impact of the defeat for a Byzantine audience. See Stephenson, "'About the Emperor Nikephoros,'" 101–104, for a discussion. As for the infamous episode of Nikephoros's skull used as a drinking cup, see: Theophanes, 673–674; Zonaras, 163. Ritualistically using the skull of a defeated enemy of renown as a ceremonial drinking cup was a Hunno-Turkic steppe tradition of long standing. For the tradition among the Bulgars, see V. Beshevliev, "Chashi ot cherepi u prabŭlgarite," *GSUiff* 22, no. 3 (1926): 1–23. Sophoulis, 19–20, with no supporting evidence, considered the skull episode "far-fetched" and "fictitious," despite acknowledging that such was "common [practice] among Eurasian nomads."

56. Theophanes, 673; “Chronicle of 811,” 89–90; Treadgold, *Byzantine Revival*, 174; Sophoulis, 216. Word of the empire’s defeat by the Bulgars and the death of the emperor quickly spread throughout the eastern world. See J. Wortley, “Legends of the Byzantine Disaster of 811,” *Byzantion* 50 (1980): 533–562.
57. *BVIF*, “*Synaxarion* of Nicholas the Monk,” 488–489; Treadgold, *ibid.*, 174–175 and n.
58. Treadgold, *ibid.*, 174.
59. Sophoulis, 216.
60. Bozhilov and Gyuzelev, 139–140; Fine, *Early Medieval Balkans*, 101f; Sophoulis, 221.
61. Runciman, *A History*, 58.
62. Theophanes, 679.
63. *Ibid.*
64. *Ibid.*; *Voices*, 6–7.
65. Fine, *Early Medieval Balkans*, 103f; Sophoulis, 224–225; Obolensky, *Byzantine Commonwealth*, 120.
66. Curta, *Southeastern Europe*, 152, used the “order of battle” phrase, although he was referring to Krum’s army at Versinikia in 813.
67. See *Voices*, 6 n, 7; Iv. Venedikov, *Hambarliiskite nadpisi ot vremeto na han Krum, razgledhdani ot voenno stanovishte* (Sofia, 1937); Georgiev, “Bŭlgarskiyat saraktov;” Rashev, “Krumoviyat sarakt.”
68. Theophanes, 681; Theophanes Continuatus (hereafter, Theo. Cont.), *Chronographia*, in *GIBI* 5, M. Voinov, et al., eds. (Sofia 1964), 109; John Skylitzes, *A Synopsis of Byzantine History, 811–1057*, J. Wortley, trans (Cambridge, 2010), 13–14; Zonaras, 164.
69. Theophanes, 682; Zonaras, 165; Joseph Genesios, *On the Reigns of the Emperors*, A. Kaldellis, trans (Canberra, 1998), 12; Treadgold, *Byzantine Revival*, 184; Runciman, *A History*, 59–60; Sophoulis, 232.
70. *Nessèbre* 1, T. Ivanov, et al., eds. (Sofia, 1969), *passim*.
71. Theophanes, 683–684; Zonaras, 164; *ibid.*, 157f. Sophoulis, 234, posited that Krum might have garrisoned Mesembria after its fall.
72. Theophanes, 683; Zonaras, 165.
73. *Scriptor incertus* 2, in *BVIpid* 1, 106; *BVIF*, 173; Treadgold, *ibid.*, 185–186; Sophoulis, 234–235, 236–237 (who estimated a total force of 20,000 men); Bury, *ERE*, 349–350; Haldon, *The Byzantine Wars*, 76–77 (30,000 troops: 8000 from the two Balkan themes; 4000 in the *tagmata*; and 18,000 from the Anatolian themes). Bozhilov and Gyuzelev, 134, supported Haldon’s computation.
74. Theophanes, 684.
75. *Ibid.*; Sophoulis, 238.

76. Theophanes, *ibid.*; *Scriptor incertus 2*, 107 (where Aplakes exaggeratedly argued that the Byzantines outnumbered the Bulgars by a 10: 1 margin); Sophoulis, 237–238 (postulated that Krum’s army numbered 6000–7000 men, composed of light cavalry, mostly Slav infantry, and an elite force of heavy cavalry under Krum’s direct authority); Haldon, *The Byzantine Wars*, 76–77 (estimated that Krum commanded 12,000 men). Although none of our sources noted which wings of the Byzantine army Aplakes and Leo led, this author has assigned them to the right and left, respectively, as do many Bulgarian scholars, based on the tradition in later Ottoman armies that gave command of their army’s right wing to the senior officer from the continent in which the battle was fought. Since the Ottomans borrowed extensively from Byzantine traditions, one might assume that such a ritualistic command practice originated in Byzantium, which, like the Ottomans, possessed a military that straddled two continents.
77. *Scriptor incertus 2*, *ibid.*; Sophoulis, 237–238; Treadgold, *Byzantine Revival*, 186–187; Haldon, *ibid.*, 77; *BVIF*, 173–174.
78. *Scriptor incertus 2*, *ibid.*; Skylitzes, 5.
79. Sophoulis, 239–240.
80. *Scriptor incertus 2*, *op. cit.*
81. *Ibid.*; Theophanes, 685; Genesisios, 5; Skylitzes, 5–6; *BVIF*, 175–176; Sophoulis, 240–242 (who provided the possible Byzantine casualty figures); Haldon, *Byzantine Wars*, 77.
82. Theophanes, *ibid.*; *Scriptor incertus 2*, *ibid.*; Genesisios, *ibid.*; Skylitzes, *ibid.*
83. Haldon, *op. cit.*, 76–78; Treadgold, *Byzantine Revival*, 187–188. Sophoulis, 242, credited Leo with conducting an organized withdrawal with his Anatolian troops to cover the rout of the others. Some Bulgarian studies (*ex. BVIF*, *op. cit.*) contended that, in an action unreported by Byzantine sources, Krum, whose force was not as greatly outnumbered as generally thought, attacked the Anatolians with his light cavalry and elite retinue from the second battle line and forced their retreat.
84. Theophanes, 685–686; *Scriptor incertus 2*, 107–108.
85. *Scriptor incertus 2*, 108; Theophanes, 686.
86. *Scriptor incertus 2*, *ibid.* Theophanes, *ibid.*, called Krum the “new Sennacherib,” or arch-devil, reflecting the common Christian Byzantine perception of pagan peoples as either devils or animals. Therefore, it was not considered perfidious for a Christian emperor to lure, entrap, and kill a powerful and threatening pagan enemy ruler under the pretext of unarmed peace negotiations. See Runciman, *A History*, 63–64.
87. *Scriptor incertus 2*, *ibid.*; Theophanes, *ibid.*

88. *Scriptor incertus* 2, *ibid.*; Genesisios, 13; Bury, *ERE.*, 355 and n.
89. Van Millingen, chap. XIX, and *ODB* 2, 907, for the location, history, and significance of the Hebdomon palace.
90. *Scriptor incertus* 2, *op. cit.*; Theophanes, *op. cit.*; Symeon the Logothete, *Chronographia*, in *BVIF*, 497. Two locations for the St. Mamas palace have been proposed by scholars: One on the Golden Horn, to the northwest of Blakhernai, and the other on the Bosphoros. Van Millingen, 175, 181, and most late nineteenth-century specialists posited the former while R. Janin, *Constantinople byzantine: Développement urbain et répertoire topographique*, 2nd. rev. and expanded ed. (Paris, 1964), 141, and most modern scholars have accepted the latter. *ODB* 1, 312, placed it at Dolmabahçe rather than Beşiktaş.
91. *Scriptor incertus* 2, 109.
92. *Ibid.*; Theophanes, 686; Skylitzes, 118; Symeon the Logothete, *op. cit.* Mutafchiev, *IBN* 1, 142, and Treadgold, *Byzantine Revival*, 202, posited that the captives totaled 40,000. Sophoulis, 256–257, held that the figures were inflated.
93. *Scriptor incertus* 2, *ibid.*
94. *Ibid.*, 110.
95. *Ibid.* For the Blakhernai walls, see: Van Millingen, chap. XII; Turnbull, 31–32. For Leo's embassy to the Franks, see: *REA*, B.W. Scholz and B. Rogers, trans (Ann Arbor, MI, 1970), 97; *Annales Laurissenses minores*, in *LIBI* 2, Iv. Duichev, et al., eds. (Sofia, 1960), 23; *Annalista Saxo*, in *LIBI* 3, 141.
96. *Scriptor incertus* 2, *ibid.*; V. Gyuzelev, "Za naslednika na han Krum na bŭlgarskiya prestol," in *Sbornik v pamet Al. Burmov* (Sofia, 1973), 137–142. For Omurtag, see: D. D. Ovcharov, *Omurtag kana syubigi, ot boga vladetel na bŭlgarite* (Sofia, 2002); Andreev, 37–43; P. Nikov, "Han Omurtag i kavhan Isbul," *BIB* 4, no. 1 (1931–1932): 1–55.
97. For Omurtag's persecution of Christians, see: *Voices*, 13–14, 15; *Menologion imperatoris Basilii*, in *GIBI* 6, M. Voinov, et al., eds. (Sofia, 1965), 55; Skylitzes, 118–119, 119 n; Sophoulis, 270–272. Whittow, 281, doubted whether any persecutions of Christians actually occurred, attributing the stories to Byzantine anti-Bulgar propaganda.
98. Treadgold, *Byzantine Revival*, 207–214.
99. Genesisios, 13; Skylitzes, 15; Treadgold, *ibid.*, 215; *id.*, "The Bulgars' Treaty with the Byzantines in 816," *RSBS* 4 (1984): 217–219 (for the date).
100. Genesisios, 13–14; Skylitzes, 15–16. Skylitzes gave a different account of the decisive engagement than did Genesisios (which our study follows), stating that the Bulgars initially broke Leo's army in open battle but became disorganized in their pursuit of the defeated Byzantines. When

the emperor observed those developments from “his” hill, he rallied his tagmatic units, struck the disordered Bulgars by surprise, and swept them from the field. Our study follows Treadgold’s (*ibid.*) date and location.

101. *Voices*, 7–8, 12; Genesisios, 24.
102. For the Great Fence, see: Koledarov, *Politicheska geografiya*, 34f; Blagoev, “Pogranichniyat okop;” Runciman, *ibid.*, app. VI; Bury, “The Bulgarian Treaty,” 360 and n; and the works cited above in note 76 to our study’s Introduction.
103. Genesisios, 36; G. Petrova, “Han Omurtag i tridesetgodishniya miren dogovor s Vizantiya,” *SD*, no. 1 (1982): 74–82; Treadgold, “The Bulgars’ Treaty;” Bury, “The Bulgarian Treaty.”

## Interlude: From Bulgar State to Bulgaria, 816–893

In erecting a stone column at Pliska carved with a summary of the 816 treaty and constructing the Great Fence to delineate his Thracian border with the empire, Omurtag considered the peace with Byzantium as more than a temporary cessation of hostilities. With Emperor Leo V embroiled in the contentious reinstatement of Iconoclasm and facing other domestic and foreign problems, Byzantium had little immediate interest in breaking the peace. During the 15 remaining years of his reign, Omurtag advanced into imperial territory only once, and did so as the ally of a Byzantine emperor fighting off a widespread rebellion.

In December 820 Leo was murdered by followers of his close associate Michael the Amorian, who claimed the Byzantine throne as Michael

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The following works provided the basic informational framework for the text of this first interlude in the hegemonic wars: Bozhilov and Gyuzelev, pt. 2, chap. 7, pt. 3, chaps. 1–3; Zlatarski, *IBDSV* 1/1, 376–447; id., *IBDSV* 1/2, 29–279; Mutafchiev, *IBN* 1, chaps. VI, sect. 2–3, VII–VIII; *IB* 2, pt. II, chap. 3, sect. 3–5, chap. 4, pt. III, chaps. 1–2; *IB* 5 VI, 87–88; Tzvetkov, 112–132; Andreev, 37–64; Gyuzelev, *The Adoption of Christianity*; Sophoulis, chap. 8; Runciman, *A History*, 74–151; Browning, *Byzantium and Bulgaria*, 50–60; Fine, *Early Medieval Balkans*, 106–140; Curta, *Southeastern Europe*, 156–179; *NCMH* 2, 236–248; *NCMH* 3, T. Reuter, ed. (Cambridge, 1999), 567–571; Obolensky, *Byzantine Commonwealth*, 81–97, 102–106; Bury, *ERE*, 363–374; Whittow, 279–287; Treadgold, *A History*, chaps. 13–14; Ostrogorsky, *History*, chap. III., sect. 7, chap. IV., sect. 1–2; Jenkins, *Imperial Centuries*, chaps. 11–15.

II (820–829). On learning of the coup, the Anatolikon thematic troops heralded their commander, Thomas the Slav, as rightful successor. A civil war then erupted that dragged on for three years. By early spring 823 Thomas controlled Anatolia, won the loyalty of most Balkan themes, and placed Michael under siege in Constantinople. In desperation the beleaguered emperor sought assistance from Omurtag, the closest potential ally, and the Bulgar ruler responded favorably.<sup>1</sup>

As spring 823 progressed, Omurtag led his army into Byzantine Thrace, bearing down along the Diagonal highway on the rear of Thomas's army entrenched before Constantinople. After some mutual maneuvering, the forces of Omurtag and Thomas met on a plain near an old Roman aqueduct, called Kedouktos by the Byzantines, near the Aegean coast. Both sides suffered heavy casualties in the battle, but the Bulgars emerged victorious. The battle at Kedouktos decisively tipped the scales of the civil war in Michael's favor. He defeated what remained of Thomas's army and besieged his contender in Arkadiopolis for five months, eventually capturing and executing Thomas in October 823. By that time Omurtag had returned home in triumph and built a stone victory monument bearing an inscription touting the *han's* achievements "against the Greeks and the Slavs."<sup>2</sup>

Omurtag consolidated his succession to the throne in a timely fashion after initially facing opposition from members of his extended family. His authority over some of the far flung—and militarily indispensable—Slavic tribes on the state's peripheries remained tenuous, however, accounting for Omurtag spending much of his reign attempting to solidify his state's borders in both the northeast and northwest.<sup>3</sup>

Close to the time that Omurtag intervened in Byzantium's civil war, other Bulgar forces operated in the region of present-day Ukraine against a Magyar threat to the state's extreme northeastern frontier along the Dniester River, but the lone extant source for that situation provides scant information.<sup>4</sup> Omurtag's primary interests, however, lay in the northwest, where his state abutted lands claimed by the Franks. While he intervened in Byzantium's civil conflict and defended his Dniester border, he became heavily engaged in affairs with the Frank Empire over regions in southern Pannonia.

Krum's heavy exactions of men and materials had disgruntled a number of Slavic tributary tribes inhabiting Pannonia's southern stretches, and Omurtag's conscription policies among them until securing the 816 treaty stoked their continued discontent. Within two years of the treaty's

signing, his Timochani Slavic tributaries contacted the Franks seeking protection. Their lead was followed between 818 and 824 by three other south Pannonian Slavic tributaries, whose defection not only meant losses in manpower and tribute for Omurtag but a serious destabilization of his state's northwestern border.<sup>5</sup> With most of his military forces occupied in Thrace and on the Dniester frontier, he initially had little recourse other than diplomacy to deal with the matter.

Commencing in 824 Omurtag spent three years in fruitless negotiations seeking a stable settlement of border and demographic issues with Frank Emperor Louis I the Pious (814–833, 835–840), who disingenuously rebuffed all his efforts. In 827 a frustrated Omurtag launched a military operation against the Franks, their Pannonian Croat allies, and the breakaway tributaries along the lower Drava River, catching them off guard and meeting weak resistance.<sup>6</sup> After displacing the local chieftains and imposing new Bulgar governors on the inhabitants, Omurtag's troops halted. Fighting resumed the following year with no significant results, but in 829 a new round of devastation along the banks of the Drava ensued as the Bulgars looted and burned a number of riverside Frank estates and pushed the Bulgar state's Pannonian border west of the Tisza River into the heart of Pannonia.<sup>7</sup> The war dragged on as a low-level conflict until peace was made in 832, a year after Omurtag's death.<sup>8</sup>

While engaged with the Franks, Omurtag solidified his leadership within the Bulgar state. He was most responsible for securing the supreme authority of the *han* and creating a functioning central governing administration. By using membership in his retinue to form a large pool of loyal supporters cutting across traditional clan lines, he built a dependable power base. State administration was restructured into a highly institutionalized, hierarchical, and centralized construct dependent upon the ruler. The wealth, prestige, and standing of individual *boili* came to depend on their positions within the governing hierarchy. Although their actual political power was reduced, their elite social status was preserved and defined and they were rewarded through royal largess. To cement his new order, Omurtag laid claim to divine origin for his rule.<sup>9</sup> His governing supremacy was physically demonstrated by an active domestic building policy, which included the stone reconstruction and enlargement of the ruined palace and fortifications at Pliska.

Omurtag also publicly proclaimed his continued wariness of the Byzantines by his intolerant stance toward Christianity, which was



spreading among his subjects throughout his reign. By his time, the Bulgars associated Christianity with the Byzantine Empire, especially after the atrocities inflicted on the pagan inhabitants of the state by the Christian Byzantines during Emperor Nikephoros I's 811 campaign. The numerous refugees and captives settled by Krum spread Christianity among the Bulgar and Slavic populations. Omurtag and his *boili*, staunchly pagan, viewed this development as a direct threat to the sociopolitical order they dominated. In addition, the Orthodox Christian church was centered on Byzantium's patriarchate of Constantinople so Orthodox members of the state's population might be considered potential Byzantine agents. Omurtag realized that mass conversions to Christianity raised the specter of his state's future reduction to Byzantine client status. He therefore persecuted Christians as a matter of state policy. Despite his efforts, Christianity continued to spread.<sup>10</sup>

The Bulgar leadership's antipathy toward Christianity determined the succession to the throne on Omurtag's death in 831. He sired three sons: Enravota (or Voïn; Boyan), the eldest; Zvinitsa; and the youngest, Malamir (or Malomir), who was a minor when his father died. The natural heir was Enravota, but his conversion to Christianity rendered him unacceptable in pagan Bulgar governing circles. Zvinitsa apparently predeceased his father, leaving the youth Malamir (831–836) as the only possible successor. Because of his age, he spent most of his reign in a regency-partnership with the militarily capable and extremely wealthy *kavhan*, Isbul, who had been his father's chief official.<sup>11</sup>

When Malamir attained the throne the 816 treaty with Byzantium remained firmly in place since neither side had rekindled hostilities during his father's rule. The mandatory 10-year treaty renewal had occurred without a hitch in 826. Peace with Byzantium permitted Malamir to continue the foreign and domestic policies pursued by his father. He ended the war with the Franks, thus settling the state's northwestern border issues.<sup>12</sup> Domestic building projects continued and Malamir kept his Bulgar elite contented with his rule through lavish feasts and gifts. The Bulgar leadership's anti-Christian sentiment remained strong, as demonstrated by Malamir's execution of his brother Enravota around 833 for refusing to forsake his Christian faith.<sup>13</sup>

As time for the 816 treaty's second renewal approached, the pacific relations between the Bulgars and Byzantium began to erode. Emperor Michael's successor Theophilos (829–842) did not interest himself with Balkan affairs until 836, when the looming need to renew the treaty with

the Bulgars gained his attention. He fell in with a plan hatched by the captive Greek colonists from Adrianople to escape service in the Bulgar state and return to their Byzantine homeland in the Macedonian theme prior to the treaty negotiations, in hopes of presenting the parties to the talks with a *fait accompli*. The Bulgar authorities had permitted the captives to exist as a self-contained and self-governing colony that had been given the name “Macedonia” by its inhabitants in honor of their thematic home territory.<sup>14</sup> In summer 836, with treaty renewal negotiations looming in the fall, the “Macedonians” rebelled, aided by military demonstrations in Thrace launched by Theophilos. Malamir’s Bulgars countered with actions of their own, capturing Philippopolis and gaining control of the High Thracian Plain.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, the “Macedonians” made their way from Bessarabia to the Danube, where a Byzantine fleet waited to carry them back to the empire, defeating a Bulgar force and the Bulgars’ Magyar temporary allies along the way. They then were transported to Constantinople and permitted to resettle in their former homeland in the vicinity of Adrianople.<sup>16</sup>

The 816 treaty was renewed in fall 836 with negotiated amendments reflecting the *quid pro quo* of the preceding summer’s events. The Bulgars gained control of the High Thracian Plain, extending their state’s southern border to the Rhodopes and giving them control of a long section of the trans-Balkan Diagonal highway, but they lost some 40,000 individuals who previously had played a crucial role in defending the state’s northeastern frontier and providing the state with important clerical and cultural services. Conversely, Byzantium lost some peripheral territory that essentially had been administratively abandoned to local Slavic inhabitants since Krum’s time but gained the injection of a large, productive, and militarily experienced group of settlers to reinforce the manpower of the empire’s strategically important Macedonian theme. Out of those resettled refugees would emerge a future emperor who founded one of the empire’s most notable dynasties.

Malamir probably did not live to see the treaty renewed. By early 837 Presiyan (or: Presiyam; Persiyan; Prusiyan; 836–852) occupied the Bulgar throne, whose identity is a matter of some academic debate. Despite Presiyan assisting Theophilos in quelling a Slavic revolt against Byzantium in the Thessaloniki region during 837, the Byzantines launched a minor campaign in Western Thrace to cut off any possible Bulgar expansion in southeastern Macedonia. Whatever good will Presiyan may have felt toward Byzantium was dowsed by the brief

campaign, although there probably occurred no significant clashes between the two states' troops. He viewed the campaign as an insulting display of imperial ingratitude and had an inscribed stone column erected in Philippi on which he vented his spleen regarding Byzantine thanklessness: "When someone tells the truth, god sees. And when someone lies, god sees that too. The Bulgars did many favors for the Christians, but the Christians forgot them. But god sees."<sup>17</sup>

In contrast to Byzantine untrustworthiness, Presiyan made it a point of Bulgar honor to abide by the letter of the 30-year peace treaty until it expired in 846. Although he initiated no direct hostilities against the empire during that time, he pursued an alternative strategy aimed at benefiting his state while humbling Byzantium. Acutely aware of Byzantine sensibilities about exerting imperial suzerainty over independent Balkan *Skлавинии*, Presiyan sought to beat the empire to the punch in that regard. He spent the greater part of his reign extending his authority over Slavs inhabiting the central and western Balkans, particularly in Macedonia, Kosovo, and Raška, regions easily reached by Bulgar forces from their centrally located staging area in the Sofia Basin.

The details of Presiyan's expansionary advances are murky, but there is no doubt that Bulgar expansion occurred. For the first time, the Bulgars pushed west of the Vardar River and moved southwestward in Macedonia toward the Adriatic. Presiyan's forces entered the Kosovo region on Macedonia's north, where they exerted pressure on a group of Slavic tribes in the mountainous Raška region, immediately west of Kosovo and south of Dalmatian Croatia, with whom the Bulgars previously had maintained peaceful relations and a common border—the Serbs.

A small Serbian state had recently arisen in Raška. Omurtag's suppression of his Slavic clients' breakaway attempts in 826–827 to their north, coupled with Presiyan's more recent successful efforts to exert suzerainty over the Macedonian Slavs to their south, inspired some Serbian tribes to unite under a common ruler (*župan*) named Vlastimir (d. 850) to defend themselves against a looming threat of Bulgar encirclement and possible conquest. Raškan Serb unification was aided by rich Byzantine subsidies to encourage the process. When Presiyan invaded Serbian territory sometime in 839, Vlastimir's troops mounted stiff resistance and the fighting dragged on for three years. Later Byzantine sources claimed that the Serbs ultimately defeated the Bulgars but this is open to question. The Bulgars extracted tribute payments in return for ending the

fighting in 842. The newly unified Serbian state retained its independent existence, and further Bulgar westward expansion in the area was blocked.<sup>18</sup>

Nothing further is known specifically about Bulgar political affairs during Presiyan's reign other than Malamir's previous treaty with the Franks was renewed in 845.<sup>19</sup> Scholars have conjectured that the Bulgar presence within the state declined while that of the Slavs increased because of continued state enlargement. Presiyan's strategy of territorial expansion in the central and western Balkans to preclude Byzantium from doing likewise was successful. Bulgar gains in those regions represented Byzantine losses. As a result, the empire was confined mostly to the Greek-speaking regions of the south, where the intensive policy of Hellenizing the remaining Slavic settlements begun under Nikephoros I continued. Along the Balkans' Adriatic coastline, an active imperial presence was maintained in little more than the city of Dyrrakhion and its hinterland while the empire's control over most of Dalmatia was intermittent at best. Croats and Serbs held the remote northwestern portions of the peninsula but the rest of the Balkan regions north of Byzantium's southern holdings were controlled by the Bulgars. By the mid-ninth century the Byzantine Empire faced the stark reality that the Bulgar state represented the dominant power in the Balkans.<sup>20</sup>

Han Boris I (or Bogoris; 852–889) ascended the Bulgar throne in 852.<sup>21</sup> His authority extended over most of the Balkan Peninsula, Wallachia and the steppe lands to the Dniester, portions of Transylvania, and a large part of Pannonia, where his holdings bordered on the newly arisen Great Moravian state. Along the Danube River in Pannonia and Slavonia, his immediate northwestern neighbors were the Franks and their Pannonian Croat client state. Beyond the Morava River to his west lay Serbian Raška, and below it lay Byzantine Dyrrakhion and its Dalmatian coastal holdings. South of Boris's Macedonian possessions stood Byzantine Greece, tied to imperial Thrace by a narrow corridor running along the Aegean coast. In the south he held most of the Struma and Mesta river valleys and northern Thrace. On the east, his authority stretched along the Black Sea coast from above Debeltos to the mouth of the Dniester River.<sup>22</sup>

Although Boris's lands were extensive, size did not ensure their security. The rugged Balkan terrain worked against strong political centralization. Other than on the Danubian and Pannonian plains, Wallachia, and the steppe lands, mountains broke the state into a conglomeration

of isolated valleys, plateaus, and basins tied together by mostly primitive roadways that were difficult to traverse and frequently blocked during winter months. This situation made the imposition of central authority in regions of the state uneven and oftentimes questionable.

In addition to obstacles posed by terrain, the state's population was divided among Turkic-speaking Bulgars, extensive Slavic-speaking communities, and former Byzantine Greek-speaking subjects. Ethnic divisions were intensified by religious diversity, exhibiting two different forms of paganism among Bulgars and Slavs, with Christianity infiltrating the entire population, especially the Slavs. Governance of the state was concentrated among the elite Bulgars, but their numbers were declining. Lacking in the Balkans the extensive grasslands that originally spawned their steppe nomadic warrior culture, the Bulgars faced inevitable assimilation by their increasingly numerous Slavic subjects. The small influx of additional Bulgar groups from Pannonia a half-century earlier made little impact on the Bulgars' long term ethnic outlook. Growing increasingly settled and agricultural, they appeared destined to lose the military advantages of their steppe traditions.

Meanwhile, the Bulgar state faced growing external threats. Byzantium was an intractable enemy. Despite apparent Bulgar preeminence, the Byzantines considered the Bulgars' Balkan holdings imperial territory only temporarily lost and would make concerted efforts for their recovery should favorable future opportunities arise. The possibility for such efforts had been increased by the Magyars' arrival on the Ukrainian steppes in the 820s. Those newcomers were Khazar clients who, in turn, were Byzantine allies. The Magyars' presence posed the threat of a two-front war against the Bulgars whenever Byzantium felt the time ripe for such action. In that case, the natural ramparts of the Balkan Mountains, which had admirably served the Bulgars in the past, would lose their defensive value. To the northwest loomed the Frank Empire and its Croat clients. Although peace held along the Bulgar-Frank common border, past warfare had erupted over competitive issues of territorial and demographic expansion and could do so again. Although Byzantium's relations with the Franks were far less amiable than those with the Khazars, any outbreak of Bulgar-Frank hostility could prove advantageous for the empire. Geographically sandwiched between Byzantium and the Franks, the Bulgars were at a distinct strategic disadvantage.<sup>23</sup>

Boris initially seemed unaware of the potential dangers to his state posed by its physical and human situations. Eager to display his might, he spent much of his reign's first decade conducting generally unsuccessful warfare against his neighbors, over the course of which his eyes were opened regarding those acute threats.

Immediately on attaining the throne, Boris renewed the 845 treaty with the East Frank King Louis (or Ludwig) the German (840–876) to forestall problems in the northwest while he concentrated on ambitions in the southeast.<sup>24</sup> Hoping to extort additional territorial concessions in Thrace from the Byzantines, who were preoccupied with Arab threats in Sicily and ruled by a regency acting in the name of the minor emperor, Michael III (842–867), in 853 Boris conducted large-scale raids in that region. He won a new peace arrangement that included minor territorial concessions on the Byzantines' part, recognizing his control of the ruined Black Sea port-cities of Ankhialos and Debelto, along with a 25-mile (40.25 km) deep plot of land lying south of the Great Fence. Although Boris's new acquisitions provided little actual benefit for his state—the Black Sea ports were dismantled shells and the Thracian land was mostly wasteland—he claimed them as victory trophies over Byzantium and evidence of his elevated prestige as ruler. Unfortunately, they proved his first and only territorial spoils of war.<sup>25</sup> Soon after this minor victory, events in Pannonia drew Boris's attention to his northwestern frontier, where he would become embroiled for the next 10 years.

Of immediate concern was East Frank King Louis the German's expansionary ambitions in Pannonia, coupled with the rise and expansion of the Slavic state of Great Moravia). After the collapse of the Avar *kaganate* in the early ninth century, Slavic tribes in the rugged northwestern regions of its former lands gained independence and coalesced into a state, called Great Moravia) by the Byzantines, and ruled by a native prince and client of the Frank king, Rostislav (846–870), an ambitious and adroit individual who tested the limits of independent leeway available to a Frank client.<sup>26</sup> He expanded his territories, advancing his southern border to near the Tisza River, where he established contact with the Bulgar state's extreme northwestern frontier. By 853 Rostislav was enticed to confront Louis by the East Frank king's royal brother, West Frank King Charles the Bald (843–877), who provided rich subsidies as encouragement. Unsure of going it alone against the East Franks, Rostislav contacted Boris, whose possessions bordered Louis's

in Pannonia, and struck a military alliance supported by bribes from the West Frank king. His own confidence buoyed by the recent easy victory over Byzantium, Boris embraced the opportunity for winning new military laurels and expanding his domains in Pannonia.

In 854 a loosely coordinated Bulgar–Moravian attack on the East Franks was unleashed. Boris attacked the Franks’ south Pannonian border marches hard and invaded the territories of Louis’s Pannonian Croat client state. The expected victory proved beyond his grasp and Boris sued for peace. He agreed to evacuate his troops from Croat territory and exchanged gifts with Croat Duke Trpimir I (845–864), establishing peaceful relations between the two states that lasted for over half a century. Other Bulgar efforts directly against Frank borders farther north brought no victories and may have resulted in reverses seriously undermining Boris’s control of his upper Pannonian holdings. Rostislav fared better in the fighting.<sup>27</sup>

While Rostislav had much to gain by persisting in the conflict, Boris did not. After suffering sobering defeats by the Franks and their Croat clients, Boris realized he had more to lose than gain by fighting costly warfare on his state’s extreme northwestern periphery against the powerful East Frank king. Although Rostislav continued his operations with some success, Boris unilaterally withdrew from the conflict. He pulled his troops back from Louis’s border marches, rested and reorganized them on the plains east of the Danube, and then marched them south of the Sava River into the Balkans. Since Byzantium remained preoccupied with the Arabs and the 853 peace with the empire still held, he cut his losses to the Franks and undertook a new operation with his mobilized army.

Boris decided to forego further expansionary efforts in distant Pannonia to concentrate on securing his authority over territories in Macedonia and Albania by invading Raškan Serbia, located in the rugged highlands to the north of those regions. He sought to eliminate a potential threat to his western Balkan possessions’ northern flank and, at the same time, extend his political sway northward to the borders of his new-found Pannonian Croat “friends,” thus providing him with possible leverage in future relations with the East Frank Kingdom.<sup>28</sup>

Boris invaded Raškan Serbia sometime between 855 and 860. His troops faced those of Mutimir (*ca.* 850–891), Strojimir, and Gojnik, sons of the dead Vlastimir. Details of the military operations are lacking but apparently the Serbs ambushed, defeated, and captured a significant portion of Boris’s forces in the mountainous terrain. To ransom the

captives, who included his young son Rasate (or Hrūsate, later known as Vladimir), Boris was compelled to seek peace and agree to withdraw from Raškan soil. A high-level Serbian escort, commanded by two of Mutimir's sons, Borena (or Brana) and Stefan, accompanied his army's retreat to the Bulgar border as a guarantee against further Serbian ambushes. On safely arriving at the Bulgar frontier, Boris and Mutimir's sons exchanged gifts as a sign of restored peaceful relations between the two states. Boris publicly portrayed the Serbs' presents as tribute, despite the humiliating defeat suffered at their hands, and he may even have convinced them to accept an alliance that temporarily undermined Byzantium's influence at their court. Boris's resulting friendship with Mutimir and his family held fast and provided the Bulgars with future opportunities to intervene in Serbian internal affairs.<sup>29</sup>

By the time the Serbian war ingloriously ended, Boris had spent most of his reign's first decade conducting unsuccessful warfare on his state's western frontiers. As an intelligent and insightful individual, he must have seriously reflected on the circumstances that led to such disappointing results and concluded that fundamental changes in governing policy were needed to address issues adversely affecting the efficiency, strength, and capabilities of his military and political authority. A decade of military frustration convinced him to cease playing the role of traditional "Bulgar *han*" and take on the mantle of a "European prince."

Given mid-ninth century cultural realities in regions influenced by the Roman world, *European* meant *Christian*. Both of the Bulgar state's primary great power competitors—the Byzantine Empire and the East Frank Kingdom (soon the Germanic Holy Roman Empire)—were Christian, and both graphically displayed the dangers for neighboring non-Christian societies' continued political independence in both states' expansionary policies linked to Christian missionary activity. Conversions to Orthodox Christianity among Slavs in Greece, Thrace, and southern Macedonia, and those to Catholicism among Croatian and Moravian Slavs, had led to their total assimilation by Byzantium or dependent political clientage to the Frank state.

The dangers of Christian conversion had to be weighed against the benefits such action could provide. One obvious gain would be the unification of Boris's subjects. Ethnic and cultural divisiveness made governance and military operations difficult and inefficient, a condition exacerbated by the growing disparity in numbers between declining Bulgar and expanding Slavic populations. Boris was becoming



increasingly dependent on Slavs in the state's leadership for exerting his central authority. Christianity was spreading more rapidly among his Slavic subjects than among the Bulgars and most Slavs did not share the pagan *boili's* malice toward Christianity. By converting the state to Christianity, the religious and cultural barriers separating Boris's population could be eliminated and a common cultural bond cemented in their place. Other benefits for his central authority would then accrue. A unified Bulgarian population would more reliably support the central government and be far easier to administer, despite the state's geographic obstructions. Furthermore, conversion to Christianity would benefit the state's foreign relations. Boris would gain enhanced international recognition of his state as a member of the Christian European political community, which would open normal relations within it on a level commensurate with the Bulgar state's size and power and help stave off possible future extinction as an alien, pagan threat by either of the neighboring Christian empires. A transcendent consideration for Boris, who no doubt was having trouble maintaining the continued loyalty of his *boili* because of his sorry military record, may have been the universal validity that Christianity lent a ruler who, as the Christian God's viceroy on earth, stood above all others within the ruling elite, *à la* the emperor in Constantinople.<sup>30</sup> The trick to Christian conversion, as Boris certainly must have understood, was to convert in such a way that the benefits were attained but the threats to state independence were either eliminated or minimized. Addressing that problem required astute diplomacy, for which Boris proved exceptionally talented.

In pulling out of his Moravian alliance and unilaterally terminating military operations against the Franks, he preserved his options for dealing with Louis the German. This stroke led to offering Boris his first real opportunity to explore the possibilities of Christian conversion.

By the early 860s both Boris and Frank King Louis were wary of the growing power of Rostislav's Great Moravia. In 863 an alliance was struck between Boris and Louis for making common cause against Moravia. The following year the two met to coordinate their military operations, at which time Boris mentioned his interest in turning Christian and implying that he might do so through papal auspices.<sup>31</sup> By hinting that he was receptive to Catholic conversion, the central ecclesiastical authority of which—the papacy—sat in distant Rome, Boris declared subsidiary clientage to Byzantium, whose Orthodox patriarchate and ruler resided in nearby Constantinople, unacceptable.

Rostislav, whose astuteness rivaled Boris's, came to a similar conclusion a year earlier. Faced by the newly concluded Bulgar–Frank alliance, in 863 he turned to Byzantium for aid and sought an alliance to neutralize that pact, as well as Byzantine missionaries to counteract those of the Catholic Franks who were active inside his state.<sup>32</sup> Michael III's government quickly grasped the political opportunity furnished by the request. Concerned that the Bulgars might be transformed into Frank clients, a pro-Byzantine Moravia could serve as an effective counterweight to the Bulgar–Frank alliance or stifle it completely. The Byzantine ruler dispatched an Orthodox religious mission, led by two Greek brothers from Thessaloniki—Constantine (who later took the monastic name of Cyril) and Methodios—to help the Moravian prince fend off the Frank Catholic missionary threat to his state but could not lend any military assistance because of unsettled matters with the Arabs in Anatolia.

While overseeing the opening of Bulgar military operations against Moravia during 864, Boris received word of unexpected dire developments along his southeastern border with Byzantium. After imposing a secure peace on the Arabs in late summer 863, the Byzantines turned serious attention on their Bulgar competitor for Balkan hegemony. Emperor Michael had been informed of Boris's expressed interest in Catholic Christian conversion, in close alliance with the East Franks. Byzantine Balkan interests could ill afford an expansion of papal authority and Frank influence into the peninsula's heart if Boris were permitted to undertake such action unimpeded by forceful intervention on the empire's part. With peace established in the east, Michael embraced Byzantium's military commitment to the Moravian alliance. In the empire's first full-blown military operation against the Bulgars since the late 830s, troops were transferred to Thrace and mustered along the border with the Bulgar state. At the same time, another force sailed for Mesembria on the imperial fleet.

The timing of the campaign was propitious. Bulgar forces were concentrated against the Moravians in distant Pannonia. A series of earthquakes had recently shaken the Bulgars' eastern territories while a widespread crop failure had caused famine among the shaken inhabitants affected by the tremors. These circumstances endowed the imperial armies with a decisive strategic advantage before the campaign opened. Byzantine forces along the Thracian border faced no notable organized opposition and those who arrived at Mesembria landed unopposed and captured the city.<sup>33</sup>

On learning of the Byzantine offensive, Boris immediately recognized that his military position was untenable and ordered a deputation suing for peace sent to Constantinople with all possible speed to end hostilities before they began in earnest. Military operations against Moravia ceased and Boris set off for Pliska to await word of the negotiations. When news of the settlement achieved arrived, he was both relieved and wary.

By the agreement's terms, Byzantium undertook to halt all aggressions in return for Boris accepting Orthodox Christian conversion for himself and his subjects. Furthermore, Boris was required to admit Greek clergy immediately into his state to conduct his subjects' conversion, to break off permanently his Frank alliance, and to return the Black Sea cities of Mesembria, Debeltos, and Ankhialos to imperial control. As a small friendly concession, Boris was officially permitted to annex the Struma and Mesta territories that he nominally already controlled, and his holdings in the rest of Macedonia and Albania, which the empire could not actively dispute, were acknowledged as his. Given the Bulgar state's vulnerable military situation, the terms were quite moderate, reflecting more Byzantium's strategic goal of blocking western penetration into the Balkans than strictly military concerns on the ground. Boris had no option but to accept.

The date of Boris's Christian baptism remains a matter of scholarly debate, but was probably 864.<sup>34</sup> In September a patriarchal delegation from Constantinople arrived in Pliska and Boris underwent the formal baptismal ceremony in his palace, adopting the Christian name of Michael in honor of his proxy godfather, the Byzantine emperor. Although a number of leading Bulgars and Slavs followed Boris's example, that it occurred at night lends credence to the idea that Boris realized a significant number of the Bulgar *boili* adamantly opposed Christian conversion.<sup>35</sup>

A large contingent of Greek missionary clergy established a Greek-speaking ecclesiastical organization in Pliska to oversee the mass conversions. The official missionary contingents were supplemented by a small horde of unofficial religious opportunists—Paulician and other Christian heretics, laymen, Jews, and Muslims—rendering the early conversion process somewhat chaotic. Pagan temples were destroyed or converted into Christian churches. Despite operating exclusively in the Greek language, which branded the Christian proselytizers as outsiders, the size of the Orthodox missionary establishment, the speed with which it consolidated its position and expanded its activities, and the continued

presence of Byzantine military forces along the state's southeastern border conspired to numb the pagan Bulgar opposition in the early months of the conversions.<sup>36</sup>

By mid-866 it became apparent to many Bulgar leaders that the Byzantines' approach toward conducting the conversions was similar to their earlier efforts among the Slavs in Greece, which had led to the cultural assimilation of the Christianized Slavs into the Greek-speaking imperial population and the imposition of direct imperial political control. Moreover, conversions on such a mass scale entailed a rapid cultural transformation for the state's inhabitants, with engrained pagan values, morals, rituals, and customs being quickly displaced by imposed Christian counterparts, about which the converts initially knew little or nothing. The result was cultural and social disruption as fear, pessimism, confusion, and uncertainty regarding the new modes of life and their social implications accompanied the conversions. Concerned over increased Byzantine influence throughout the state, terrified at losing the protection of their sky-god Tangra and the various totems validating their claims to leadership, and discontented with the sad military record of their ruler, which they blamed as the root cause of their troubles, in 866 a number of *boil* leaders staged a statewide rebellion aimed at overthrowing and killing Boris, halting the Christian conversions, and expelling the Greek interlopers.

Taking advantage of widespread cultural perplexity and growing discontent, the rebels won support in every state province. Details of the uprising are lacking and only a legendary account, filled with miraculous Christian symbolism, has survived while one grisly aftermath was mentioned by Pope Nicholas I (858–867) in a late 866 letter to Boris. Although active throughout the state, the rebels' primary efforts were made in Pliska. They attempted to capture the "inner city" and the *han's* palace but were defeated and crushed by Boris, who had prepared for just such an eventuality by cementing support among some Bulgar and the majority of Slavic leaders. With Boris's victory in Pliska, the uprising swiftly collapsed throughout the rest of the state. In retaliation for the rebellion, Boris executed 52 of the rebel *boil* ringleaders and liquidated their immediate families. He then strengthened his position by creating a new service nobility tied to his authority. Although some Bulgar members of the former elite continued playing roles in the post-rebellion government, their ethnic and class dominance within the state was broken.<sup>37</sup>

Despite the harsh treatment of the rebel leaders, Boris shared the disgruntled *boili's* concerns over the growing Greek presence in the state.

He was acutely aware that a Greek-speaking church organization in his lands under the patriarch of Constantinople's authority might reduce him to a Byzantine client. Bulgar state independence was under direct threat. Prior to the outbreak of the uprising Boris had concluded that the empire's state-church partnership model could be applied to his realm if an independent Bulgar church, headed by its own patriarch serving in partnership with his secular administration, were created. Such a secular-religious structure might guarantee the Bulgar state's political independence by elevating its church's status within the Christian European community and bestow on its ruler a position of divinely sanctioned authority transcending that of a simple imperial vassal.

In late 865 Boris contacted Patriarch Photios (858–867; 878–886) seeking answers to a number of questions regarding the political and practical implications of Christian conversion and the structure of the ecclesiastical organization in his state, raising the issue of an independent Bulgar church. Photios replied in early 866, in a lengthy, meticulously crafted letter that ignored Boris's practical concerns over Christian ritual and the issue of an independent Bulgar church. It instead described and defined Orthodox doctrine, Christian tradition's historical evolution, and the duties of a Christian ruler in a manner resembling a lecture delivered to a promising student by a renowned scholar. A measure of flattery was included to help render the implied message behind the rhetoric more palatable: An independent Bulgar church was unlikely, the ecclesiastical administration would remain Greek and under patriarchal authority, and Boris was a Byzantine client.<sup>38</sup> Committed to Christian conversion as a necessary foundation for future state policy, Photios's letter convinced Boris that the empire would not willingly grant ecclesiastical autonomy.

Circumstances by mid-866 provided Boris with an opportunity to overcome the dire political situation created by conversion. Byzantine forces were withdrawn from the Balkans to deal with Arab matters elsewhere. At the same time, an emotional schism developed that divided the churches of Constantinople and Rome over the non-canonical elevation of Photios as patriarch of Constantinople and matters of ecclesiastical jurisdiction in the Balkans and southern Italy, known as the Photian Schism.<sup>39</sup>

Aware of the church conflict, Boris turned to the Catholic west soon after suppressing the *boil* rebellion. A delegation requesting Catholic missionaries was dispatched to Pope Nicholas, carrying a letter seeking answers to 106 questions regarding Christian practice (but not dogma)

and church organization and a petition for an autonomous church administration.<sup>40</sup> By late November 866 a papal mission arrived in Pliska and began conducting missionary activity. Boris expelled the resident Greek clergy and turned to digesting Pope Nicholas's detailed responses to his letter of inquiry.

The letters of both Photios and Nicholas were in general agreement regarding essential religious and ecclesiastical viewpoints: Pagan traditions, mores, and rituals were condemned; governance in harmony with Christian morals was extolled; flattery of the Bulgar ruler was bestowed; and Bulgar religious autonomy was rejected. Nicholas, however, displayed more sensitivity to Boris's quandary in overseeing a rapid cultural transformation of his state's population. He provided simple, direct answers or advice to all of Boris's questions, ranging from the trivial to the important, while highlighting differences between Catholic and Orthodox practices without blatantly attacking the patriarchate.

Regarding pre-conversion Bulgar military practices, Nicholas prohibited the use of horsetail banners for officers and the old pagan pre-battle rituals, recommending that Christian substitutes be used in their place. Capital punishment for disciplinary infractions was denounced. Advice on concluding peace treaties with pagan states and declaring war on Christian ones was proffered. Although Nicholas sidestepped the issue of Bulgar church autonomy by deferring it to some uncertain later date, his attention to Boris's serious practical concerns won the Bulgar ruler's momentary favor. Boris granted exclusive authorization to the papal mission for continuing the conversion process in his state.<sup>41</sup>

Boris's "honeymoon" with the Roman church gradually soured over the issue of Bulgar church autonomy. Between 867 and 869 he made three efforts to have the papacy confirm two candidates of his choosing as head of the church in his state. Pope Nicholas and his immediate successor Hadrian II (867–872) refused, exerting papal claims to sole authority over Catholic ecclesiastical administration. By late 869 it became obvious that Rome was unlikely to authorize an autonomous church in the Bulgar state. Therefore, Boris again turned his attention to Byzantium's Orthodox patriarchate.

Developments within the empire during the three years of Boris's alliance with the papacy had increased the chances for successfully attaining in 869 the Bulgar church autonomy that had been refused by Photios in 866. In late 867 Emperor Michael III was overthrown by Basil I (867–886), scion of a family once part of the Bulgars' "Macedonian"

colony. Photios, a close associate of Michael, was deposed as patriarch by Basil and replaced by his patriarchal predecessor Ignatios (847–858; 867–877). The new emperor was anxious to heal the Photian Schism in a manner beneficial to the empire’s interests so that he could devote attention to domestic and foreign policy matters without the distraction of high-level ecclesiastical squabbling. In late 869 Basil convened an ecumenical council in Constantinople at Hagia Sophia to address the Photian issue. Only a small, three-man papal delegation attended to represent Catholic interests. While the council healed the Orthodox–Catholic schism, its most significant result came as a surprise ending in early March 870.<sup>42</sup>

Its stated business successfully completed, the council had adjourned when the delegates were summoned to reassemble in plenary session. An embassy from Boris appeared, placing before the council a question of much immediate concern: To which jurisdiction did the church in the Bulgar state belong—Rome or Constantinople? With only three papal delegates present, the answer was a foregone conclusion. On 4 March the Bulgar state’s church was declared Orthodox and autocephalous. Although Patriarch Ignatios chose the church’s first primate and his subordinate bishops, autocephalous status meant the church could elect its own future leaders, which, by implication, permitted Boris to institute the Byzantine-style state–church partnership he had pursued for years, bestowing on him *de facto* imperial recognition of his royal prerogatives. Soon thereafter, the new archbishop, his appointed bishops, and a large group of missionaries—all Greek-speaking—entered the Bulgar state. Holding the councilor decision as a mandate, Boris expelled the Catholic clerics present in his realm.<sup>43</sup>

Although he won church autonomy in 870, Boris needed to turn that success to lasting political advantage. The Greek presence that reemerged could not be completely eliminated because no other viable alternative for staffing and training a church hierarchy other than Rome existed, and the papacy opposed granting the Bulgar church autonomy. While Greek was more familiar than Latin among the Bulgar elite, both were foreign to the general population. Moreover, since Greek was so commonly recognizable, its persistent use in the Bulgars’ Orthodox church signified a threat-in-being to their continued independence from imperial control. Once again, by the mid-880s events transpired in Boris’s favor. Ironically, they were rooted in the fate of the Byzantine religious mission sent to

Rostislav's Great Moravia in 863 as part of the empire's anti-Bulgar diplomatic efforts at that time.

The Greek brothers Constantine and Methodios set off on their mission to Moravia with a small retinue of followers and armed with a number of Christian liturgical writings already translated into a newly devised Slavic alphabet—Glagolitic—that Constantine, a noted linguist, diplomat, and philosopher, created. Glagolitic consisted of a complicated series of characters rooted in a mixture of Greek, Hebrew, and assorted original letters. Those terms and grammatical structures possessing no Slavic equivalents were rendered in Greek forms. The fact that he and his brother set out promptly for Moravia in 863 with a number of texts already translated into the Slavic spoken in Macedonian regions surrounding Thessaloniki meant that Glagolitic had been created in advance of the Moravian mission, probably for a planned future mission to the Bulgars.

Once in Moravia, the missionaries proved so successful in their religious and literary mission that the German Catholic church leadership vehemently denounced them to the pope, claiming the use of liturgical Slavic was not canonical. In 867 Constantine and Methodios journeyed to Rome, where Pope Hadrian, threatened by increasing German efforts at church autonomy, sided with the brothers. Constantine entered a monastery in Rome, took the monastic name of Cyril, and died in 869. Methodios was raised to archbishop of Pannonia, which included Moravia, and returned. Rostislav's overthrow by a pro-Frank party in the following year unleashed into Moravia a flood of German clerics who exclusively used Latin. Methodios had difficulty resisting their mounting pressure and suffered imprisonment at their hands until freed on papal orders. Soon after his death in 885, his followers were expelled from Moravia by the German church authorities. Hadrian's papal successors agreed with the Germans that Glagolitic was non-canonical and its use died out in Moravia after Methodios's demise.<sup>44</sup>

Some expelled disciples of Methodios arrived at the Bulgar state's borders in 886, bringing with them their Glagolitic liturgy. Boris seized the opportunity to create a Slavic-speaking clergy in his state. With Boris's patronage and support, the new arrivals opened successful missionary operations centered on the court in Pliska and on Ohrid in Macedonia. They trained youths for the clergy and expanded the corpus of Slavic religious texts. As the number of trained Slavic-speaking priests increased, Slavic-speaking converts multiplied, creating a new sense of community



and state within the population. Separate Bulgar, Slav, and Greek ethnic identities gave way to a common Bulgarian one and regional or tribal loyalties shifted to the state, personified by its Christian ruler. A state of Bulgaria, as opposed to a Bulgar state, was born.<sup>45</sup>

At first, the non-Greek missionary church functioned using the Glagolitic Slavic script originally designed by Constantine-Cyril, but its cumbersome characters soon demonstrated the need for a more simplified alphabet to increase the numbers of trained native Slavs and replace the still predominantly Greek clergy. A new Slavic alphabet, based on modified Greek letters and named Cyrillic in honor of Constantine-Cyril, emerged in the missionary headquarters at Pliska. Cyrillic possessed the advantage of using mostly Greek characters, which were familiar to those in the state's more literate circles. The original Greek liturgical texts were progressively translated into Cyrillic and native Bulgarian clergy were trained in Cyrillic literacy. From the Pliska region, the new script spread throughout Boris's extensive territories, providing him with the basis for displacing the Greek clergy in Bulgaria and creating an authentically independent state church that lay at the heart of Orthodox political culture. Bulgarian independence from Byzantium was more reliably ensured.<sup>46</sup>

The Slavic-language Christianization of the Bulgarian population is often considered the demise of the Turkic Bulgar presence in Bulgaria and the total ethnic Slavicization of the state's population. This may have been the case but concrete supporting evidence is lacking. Ultimately, the state's Bulgar minority was assimilated by the Slavic majority. Christianity swept away the pagan beliefs of both Bulgars and Slavs and its propagation in Slavic lent the state's population a common language that ultimately bound them together into a single people and culture.<sup>47</sup>

Boris emerged from the struggle for a Slavic church as a divinely ordained ruler of an increasingly culturally unified state with a loyal population. He adopted the trappings of an Orthodox Christian autocrat, based on the only available model—the Byzantine emperor. As Christian autocrat, he issued law codes, revamped the state administration, erected churches, founded monasteries, and even participated in a military alliance with the Franks against the Moravians in 883 without jeopardizing his relations with Byzantium.<sup>48</sup> Lest it be thought that Boris cynically used Christianization strictly for political purposes, he was devout in his personal Christian beliefs. Members of his family were already Christian at the time of his baptism. He took seriously efforts to found Christian monasteries throughout his lands. He became so deeply religious that,

on surviving a serious illness in 889, he abdicated the throne and retired to one of the monasteries that he established outside Preslav.<sup>49</sup>

The legacy of Boris's reign to Bulgaria and the Orthodox European world in general was signally important. The Christianization of Bulgaria laid the foundation for a Slavic literary culture of far-reaching portent. All of Helleno-Christian culture was opened to Slavic-speakers through translation. Quickly passing from translations alone, the new Bulgarian *literati* commenced producing original works, demonstrating the cultural significance of Cyrillic for the Slavs of Eastern Europe. Because of Boris's astuteness, the future history of not only the Bulgarians but of the Serbs, Russians, Macedonians, and even the non-Slavic Romanians was affected significantly.

Boris was succeeded by his eldest son Vladimir (or: Rasate; Aldomir; 889–893).<sup>50</sup> Vladimir sympathized with the remaining traditional *boil* elite in being both anti-Christian and anti-Byzantine. He instituted a pagan revival that included persecuting Christian clergy and destroying Christian churches. Efforts also were made to reestablish the alliance with the Franks in 892.<sup>51</sup> His actions brought Boris out of retirement in 893 to lead a coup that toppled and blinded him. A state council was convened in Preslav, a Slavic and Christian center, which recognized Vladimir's deposition, released Simeon, Boris's younger son, from his monastic vows, and proclaimed Simeon the new ruler. It went on to declare Christianity the official state religion and designated Preslav as the state's new capital.<sup>52</sup>

Having saved his life's work by placing a totally committed Christian heir on the throne, Boris again retired to his monastery outside the new capital, content that his envisioned future for the state was in good hands.

## NOTES

1. George the Monk, *Chronicon*, in *GIBI* 4, Iv. Duichev, et al., eds. (Sofia, 1961), 56; Genesisios, 36; Theo. Cont., 114–115; and Skylitzes, 40.
2. Skylitzes, 41; Zonaras, 169; *Voices*, 11; P. Tivchev, "Bunüt na Toma Slavyanina i namestata na bülgarskiya han Omurtag," *IPr* 25, no. 5 (1969): 71f; P. Lemerle, "Thomas le Slave," *TM* 1 (1965), 280–281; Bozhilov and Gyuzelev, 149; Sophoulis, 298–299.
3. *NCMH* 2, 236–237; Koledarov, *Politicheska geografiya*, chap. I; id., "Administrative Structure and Frontier Set Up of the First Bulgarian Tsardom," *EB* 14, no. 3 (1978): 132–140; R. Rashev, "Küm vüprosa

- za yugoistochnata bŭlgarska granitsa prez VII–IX g.,” *Vekove* 7, no. 4 (1977): 48–54.
4. *Voices*, 9.
  5. *RFA*, 104–105, 116.
  6. *Ibid.*, 122; *Annales Fuldenses*, in *LIBI* 2, 42; Bowlus, 97.
  7. *Voices*, 10; *Annales Fuldenses*, 43.
  8. *Annalista Saxo*, 144.
  9. *Voices*, 9–13; Sophoulis, 288f; Ts. Stepanov, “The Bulgar Title ΚΑΝΑΣΥΒΙΓΓΙ: Reconstructing Notions of Divine Kingship in Bulgaria, AD 822–836,” *EME* 10, no. 1 (2001): 1–19; O. Pritsak, “The Initial formula ΚΑΝΑϸΥΒΗΓΓΗ in the Proto-Bulgarian Inscriptions,” *Studia slavica mediaevalia et humanistica Riccardo Picchio dicata* 2, M. Colucci, et al., eds. (Rome, 1986), 595–601.
  10. Gyuzelev, *The Adoption of Christianity*, chap. I., sect. 3; id., *The Proto-Bulgarians*, 56–57; B. Nikolova, “Rannoto hristiyanstvo v Bŭlgariya predi pokrŭstvaneto. Teorii i realnosti,” in *1100 godini Veliki Preslav* 1, T. Totev, et al., eds. (Shumen, 1995), 182–195; Sophoulis, chap. 2.2.2; Sedlar, 140–141.
  11. V. Zlatarski, *Izbrani proizvedeniya* 1, P. Petrov, ed. (Sofia, 1972), 155–180; T. Wasilewski, “Les successeurs de Khan Omourtag, Malamir et Presian-Zvinitsa,” *Studia in honorem Veselini Beševliev* (Sofia, 1978), 504–509; Andreev, 44–45. For Isbul, see: *Voices*, 12; P. Nikov, “Kavhan Isbul,” in *Sbornik v chest na V.N. Zlatarski, po sluchai na 30-godishminata mu nauchna i profesorska deinost* (Sofia, 1925), 195–228.
  12. *Annalista Saxo*, 144.
  13. *Voices*, *op cit.*; *Zhitiya na svetiite* (Sofia, 1974), 164.
  14. V. Tŭpkova-Zaimova, “Rolyata i administrativnata organizatsiya na t. nar. ‘Otvŭddunovska Bŭlgariya’,” *SB* 2 (Sofia, 1970), 63–73; R. Browning, “Byzantines in Bulgaria—Late 8th–Early 9th Centuries,” in *Studia Slavico-Byzantina et medievalia Europensia. In Memoriam I. Dujchev* 1, P. Dinekov, et al., eds. (Sofia, 1988): 32–36.
  15. *Voices*, 12; Treadgold, *Byzantine Revival*, 291.
  16. Bozhilov and Gyuzelev, 157–158; Zlatarski, *IBDSV* 1/1, 432–434; id., *Izbrani proizvedeniya* 1, 396–398; Runciman, *A History*, 85–86; Treadgold, *ibid.*, 290–292.
  17. *Voices*, 13; F. Dvornik, *La Vie de Saint Grégoire le Décapolite et les Slaves macédoniens au IXe siècle* (Paris, 1926), 61–62; Gyuzelev, *Kavhanite*, 68f; Treadgold, *Byzantine Revival*, 292.
  18. *DAI*, chap. 32.
  19. *AF*, T. Reuter, trans. (Manchester, 1992), 24.
  20. Toynbee, 359–360; Jenkins, *Imperial Centuries*, 153–154; Whittow, 279; Treadgold, *Byzantine Revival*, 335–337.

21. For Boris's reign, see: V. Gyuzelev, *Knyaz Boris Pŭrvi. Bŭlgariya prez vtorata polovina na IX vek* (Sofia, 1969); Andreev, 48–60; R. Sullivan, "Khan Boris and the Conversion of Bulgaria"; *NCMH* 2, 138–148.
22. Koledarov, *Politicheska geografija*, 42f and Map 6.
23. P. Petrov, "La politique étrangère de la Bulgarie au milieu du IXe siècle et la conversion des Bulgares," *Bb* 2 (Sofia, 1966), 41–43; Whittow, 279–280.
24. *AF*, 33.
25. Genesisos, 77; Theo. Cont., 117–118; Skylitzes, 90, 92; Zonaras, 170–171; G. Tsankova-Petkova, "Contribution au sujet de la conversion des Bulgares au Christianisme," *Bb* 4 (Sofia, 1973), 24–26; Koledarov, *Politicheska geografija*, 43. The treaty's date is problematic.
26. *RFA*, 112; *AF*, 25; Dvornik, *The Slavs: Early History*, 80–81; S.J. Kirschbaum, *A History of Slovakia: The Struggle for Survival* (New York, 1995), 23–26; T. Reuter, *Germany in the Early Middle Ages, c. 800–1056* (London, 1991), 82–83; Curta, *Southeastern Europe*, 130f; Barford, 108–109. Although mainstream historiography places Great Moravia in modern Moravia and western Slovakia, a dissenting interpretation locates it astride the southern Morava River in the Balkans. This view was first propounded by Imre Boba in *Moravia's History Reconsidered: A Reinterpretation of Medieval Sources* (The Hague-Wiesbaden, 1967) and embraced by a minority of scholars, including Bowlus. See Curta, *ibid.*, 126–130 and nn, for a discussion concluding that the mainstream interpretation is the most probable.
27. *AB*, 77; *AF*, 33 n; *DAI*, chap. 31; Simeon [Metropolitan of Varna], "Pismata na Teofilakta Ohridski, arhiepiskop bŭlgarski," *SbBAN* 27 (1931): 260.
28. Runciman, *A History*, 92; Fine, *ibid.*, 111–112.
29. *DAI*, chap. 32.
30. Gyuzelev, *Adoption of Christianity*, chap. II, pt. 2; *id.*, *Knyaz Boris*, 62f; Mutafchiev, *IBN* 1, 170f; D. Angelov, "Po nyakoi vŭprosi okolo pokrŭstvaneto na bŭlgarite," *IP* 21, no. 6 (1965): 50f; T. Sübeŭ, "Pronikvane na hristijanstvoto v Bŭlgariya do 865 g.," *GDA* 15 (1966): 1f; P. Petrov, "Pokrŭstvaneto na bŭlgarite," *IP* 21, no. 3 (1965): 43f; Iv. Snegarov, "Hristijanstvoto v Bŭlgariya predi pokrŭstvaneto na knyaz Borisa (865)," *GDA* 5 (1956): 195f.
31. *AB*, 118; *AF*, 49, 49 n, 51–52, 52 n; Browning, *Byzantium and Bulgaria*, 146.
32. *Life of Methodius*, in *Medieval Slavic Lives of Saints and Princes*, M. Kantor, ed. and trans. (Ann Arbor, MI, 1983), 111.
33. Niketas the Paphlagonian, *Vita Ignatii*, in *GIBI* 4, 131; Genesisos, 86; Skylitzes, 91; Zonaras, 170–171; Tsankova-Petkova, "Contribution au sujet de la conversion," 27f; Petrov, "La politique étrangère," 46–47; V.

- Beshevliev, “Tri prinosa kŭm bŭlgarskata srednovekovna istoriya,” in *Izsledvaniya v chest na Marin S. Drinov*, 291f. *NCMH* 2, 240–241, downplayed the significance of the natural disasters and Byzantine military threat.
34. A.P. Vlasto, *The Entry of the Slavs into Christendom: An Introduction to the Medieval World of the Slavs* (Cambridge, 1970), 159 and n; *NCMH* 2, 239–240 (posited that Boris may have volunteered conversion as part of his own negotiating position). Although after his baptism Boris officially used the name “Michael” on seals and in inscriptions, our study will continue using his pre-conversion name.
  35. Skylitzes, *ibid.*; Zonaras, *ibid.*; Genesios, *ibid.*; Leo the Grammarian, in *GIBI* 5, 157; George Monachus Continuatus (hereafter, *Geo. Mon. Cont.*), *Chronicon*, in *GIBI* 6, 137; Simeon [Metropolitan of Varna], 260; and *AB*, 136.
  36. Gyuzelev, *Knyaz Boris*, 82f; *id.*, *Adoption of Christianity*, 27–28; Bozhilov and *id.*, 173; Zlatarski, *IBDSV* 1/2, 82f; Mutafchiev, *IBN* 1, 174f. For the religious opportunists operating in the Bulgar state at the time, see Pope Nich., *Responses*, #14–15, 103–106.
  37. *AB*, 137; Pope Nich., *ibid.*, #17, 78; *Theo. Cont.*, 117; Skylitzes, 91–92; Gyuzelev, *Knyaz Boris*, 108f (dated the revolt to 865); Tzvetkov, 122–124.
  38. “The Letter of Photios, the Most Holy Patriarch of Constantinople, to Michael, the Ruler of Bulgaria,” in *The Patriarch and the Prince: The Letter of Patriarch Photios of Constantinople to Khan Boris of Bulgaria*, D.S. White and J.R. Berrigan, Jr., trans. and ed. (Brookline, MA, 1982), 39–79.
  39. For coverage of the Photian Schism, see: F. Dvornik, *The Photian Schism* (Cambridge, 1970); S. Runciman, *Byzantine Civilization* (London, 1933), 98–99; J.M. Hussey, *The Orthodox Church in the Byzantine Empire* (Oxford, 1986), chap. III, pt. 2; L. Simeonova, *Diplomacy of the Letter and the Cross: Photios, Bulgaria and the Papacy, 860s–880s* (Amsterdam, 1998).
  40. *AF*, 56; *AB*, 137.
  41. For Nicholas’s answers to Boris’s military and diplomatic questions, see Pope Nich., *Responses*, #22–23, 25, 33–35, 38, 40, 46, 67, 74, 81–82, and 100. Nicholas prevaricated regarding Bulgar church autonomy in #72. For analysis, see Iv. Duichev, “I ‘Responsa’ di papa Nicolò I ai Bulgari neoconvertiti,” *Aevum* 47, no. 5–6 (1968): 403–428.
  42. Jenkins, *Imperial Centuries*, 183f.
  43. V. Swoboda, “L’origine de l’organisation de l’église en Bulgarie et ses rapports avec le patriarcat de Constantinople (870–919),” *Bb* 2 (1966): 67–81. The timing and nature of the Bulgar delegation’s appearance at the council was not happenstance but the result of unrecorded prior negotiations between Boris and Basil.

44. The two important primary sources for the brothers' work are their hagiographies, found in *Medieval Slavic Lives: Life of Constantine*, 23–96; *Life of Methodius*, 97–138. For secondary coverage, see: F. Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions among the Slavs: SS. Constantine-Cyril and Methodius* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1970); Vlasto, chap. 2, "Moravia," *passim*; Bozhilov and Gyuzelev, pt. 3, chap. 2; *IB* 2, pt. III, chap. 2, sect. 1–2; Obolensky, *Byzantine Commonwealth*, 136f.
45. Theophylaktos [Archbishop of Ohrid], *Life of St. Clement of Ohrid*, in *Voices*, 143–160; *Second Life of Naum of Ohrid*, in *Voices*, 161–171; Bozhilov and Gyuzelev, pt. 3, chap. 3; Gyuzelev, *Adoption of Christianity*, chap. V, pt. 1; *IB* 2, pt. III, chap. 2, sect. 3; Vlasto, 163f; Obolensky, *Ibid.*, 94–96.
46. *IB* 2, *Ibid.*; Obolensky, *ibid.*, 96; Vlasto, 174f, 164.
47. Angelov, *Obrazuvane*, pt. 4, chaps. 3–4; S. Vaklinov, *Formirane na starobŭlgarskata kultura, VI–XI vek* (Sofia, 1977), pt. 4, chap. 1; *IB* 2, pt. III, chap. 2, sect. 4; Fine, *Early Medieval Balkans*, 128–129.
48. Gyuzelev, *Knyaz Boris*, 380f; Bozhilov and *id.*, 186f; Zlatarski, *IBDSV* 1/2, pt. III, chap. 5, *passim*; Mutafchiev, *IBN* 1, 198–200; Runciman, *A History*, 128f; Fine, *Ibid.*, 129–130. See *AF*, 109, for the 883 Bulgarian–Frank alliance.
49. *Scribal note to the Old Bulgarian translation of Athanasius of Alexandria's* Sermon against the Arians, in *Voices*, 43 (which also provided the date of Boris's death—2 May 907); *The Miracle of St. George with the Bulgarian*, in *Voices*, 44; Gyuzelev, *ibid.*, 453f; Zlatarski, *ibid.*, 247–249.
50. For Vladimir, see: Bozhilov and Gyuzelev, 221–224; Andreev, 60–61; Yu. Trifonov, "Dostoveren li e razkazŭt za oslepyavaneto na Borisoviya sin Vladimir?," *Uchilishten pregled* 5–6 (1927): 864–890.
51. *AF*, 124.
52. Regino, *Chronicon*, in *LIBI* 2, 306–307; Gyuzelev, *Knyaz Boris*, 464–468, 469f. Whittow, 285, doubted that Vladimir was an anti-Christian reactionary and instead posited that Vladimir probably died of "natural causes."

## Simeon's Campaigns for Imperial Recognition, 894–927

Perhaps by the close of 893 the Byzantine authorities could be excused being complacent regarding the emerging Christian Bulgarian state. Han Boris's conversion to Christianity in 864 and the religious settlement at the 870 church council apparently solved Byzantium's political and

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The following works provided the basic informational framework for the text of this chapter treating Knyaz/Tsar Simeon: Bozhilov and Gyuzelev, pt. 3, chap. 4; Zlatarski, *IBDSV* 1/2, 280–494; id., “Politicheskiyat zhivot na Bŭlgariya pri tsar Simeona,” *Bŭlgariya 1000 godini, 927–1927* 1 (Sofia, 1930), 3–49; Mutafchiev, *IBN* 1, chap. IX; *IB* 2, pt. III, chap. 3; *IB* 5 VI, 89–96; M. Nikolov, “Pohodite na tsar Simeon kŭm Konstantinopol,” in *Velikotŭrnovskiyyat universitet “Sv. sv. Kiril i Metodii” i bŭlgarskata arheologiya* 1, B. Borisov, ed. (Veliko Tŭrnovo, 2010), 497–504; Iv. Venedikov, “Voennata deinost na tsar Simeona,” *Bŭlgariya 1000 godini* 1: 51–60; K. Velyanov, *Voinite na tsar Simeon. Stranitsi ot nai-vŭrnoto i svetlo tsaruvane v bŭlgarska istoriya, 893–927* (Sofia, 1937); S.G. Kashev, *Pohodite na tsar Simeon* (Sofia, 1927); Tzvetkov, 129–138; Runciman, *A History*, bk. III, chap. I; id., *The Emperor Romanus Lecapenus and His Reign: A Study of Tenth-Century Byzantium*, (Cambridge, 1929), chap. V, and *passim*; Browning, *Byzantium and Bulgaria*, 57–69; id., *Byzantine Empire*, 100–107; Fine, *Early Medieval Balkans*, chap. 5; Curta, *Southeastern Europe*, 213–227; *NCMH* 3, 567–578; Obolensky, *Byzantine Commonwealth*, 97–115; Vlasto, 168–179; P. Stephenson, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier: A Political Study of the Northern Balkans, 900–1204* (Cambridge, 2000), 18–28; Whittow, 285–292; Treadgold, *A History*, chaps. 14–15; Ostrogorsky, *History*, chap. IV, sect. 3; Jenkins, *Imperial Centuries*, chaps. 15–18; C. Wells, *Sailing from Byzantium: How a Lost Empire Shaped the World* (New York, 2006), 200–209.

cultural concerns in the Balkans. A militarily dangerous pagan enemy, which had long blocked the empire's efforts to reestablish control over the Balkans' interior, was now Byzantium's Orthodox Christian cultural and political protégé. Although the autocephalous Bulgarian archbishop enjoyed a level of autonomy, he continued to recognize the Orthodox patriarchate's supreme spiritual authority. A similar situation held in the secular realm for the Christian Bulgarian ruler. Despite retaining his political independence, the Bulgarian prince (now *knjaz*) embraced Orthodoxy's imperial political ideal, which acknowledged the Byzantine emperor as God's earthly viceroy endowed with political primacy among all rulers.

That Bulgaria retained its independence posed some potentially troubling issues for the Byzantine authorities but those were not deemed ultimate matters of grave concern. The Bulgarian church's autocephaly carried the latent possibility that the Bulgarian monarch could use it to strengthen his political independence within the Orthodox governing model of state–church partnership. More of a problem was the ruler's patronage of a Slavic literary language to replace Greek in both the liturgy and official government transactions. Despite the displacement of Greek clerics within Bulgaria by native clergy trained in the Slavic script, the imperial authorities recognized certain aspects of the situation as advantageous to their interests. The Glagolitic alphabet had been created and disseminated by Byzantine missionaries while the Cyrillic was derived largely from the Greek script under the patronage of a Bulgarian ruling class familiar with Greek writing for over a century. In addition, the bulk of Slavic literary activity flourishing in Bulgaria involved translating originally Greek texts. Thus the empire's Greek cultural heritage continued to exert a forceful influence on the Christian Bulgarians, although it sported an outwardly Slavic literary guise.

In terms of bilateral state relations, affairs could not have appeared more satisfactory. During the three decades following Boris's conversion, the once militantly belligerent Bulgars remained docile neighbors, more concerned with stabilizing their internal affairs in the wake of massive cultural and social disruptions accompanying the conversions than with posing armed threats. The last serious fighting of note between the two states had occurred nearly 60 years in the past. Neither the military operations of 853 nor those of 864 had involved intensive deadly combat. Twice the traditional "war party" of anti-Byzantine, pagan *boili* had attempted to end the conversion process after its initiation,



but both efforts were crushed by Boris with the support of the majority within the state's elite. Following the second of those episodes, which involved overthrowing and blinding his eldest son and successor, Boris, determined to cement his state's commitment to the path he had chosen for it, elevated as his new princely heir an individual with impeccable Christian credentials. He placed on the throne a younger son who had been educated in Constantinople and was, at the time, an Orthodox monk and literary worker residing in a monastery outside Preslav—Simeon I (893–927).<sup>1</sup>

A less threatening Bulgarian ruler could hardly have been imagined by the imperial authorities. Their initially smug impression of the new monarch, however, was proved drastically misguided within a year of his ascending the throne.

Contrary to all initial expectations, Simeon became the most powerful medieval Bulgarian ruler. He was a charismatic leader, a consummate diplomat, and a skilled military tactician. During his reign he successfully overcame a series of state-threatening situations, won Byzantium's recognition of Bulgaria's imperial status equal to its own, solidified the Slavic-speaking Bulgarian Orthodox church, and ultimately guaranteed 40 years of Bulgarian-Byzantine peaceful coexistence following the stormy warfare that characterized a good part of his reign. He was religiously devout and cultured, excelling in fostering monasticism and patronizing Bulgarian literary efforts—activities in which he personally participated and for which he provided a large library collection of Greek books as a foundation. Under his auspices the earliest original Bulgarian Slavic literary works were produced. He showered much attention and resources on Preslav in an attempt to endow his capital with an aura of physical grandeur similar to that enjoyed by Constantinople through renovating, expanding, and decorating the princely palace, building new churches, and fostering thriving commercial quarters with numerous artisan workshops. In many modern Bulgarian national histories, Simeon's reign is portrayed as Bulgaria's "Golden Age" (Fig. 5.1).

Simeon mounted the throne in his late 20s.<sup>2</sup> He had not been groomed since childhood for ruling the Bulgar state. That upbringing had been given his elder brother Vladimir. Boris intended his younger son to pursue a vocation in the Orthodox church and, perhaps, attain the position of Bulgarian archbishop—or possibly patriarch—if all developed as hoped. To that end, in the 870s Simeon was sent to Constantinople as a teenager for study at the Magnavra palace school. As a princely



Fig. 5.1 Campaigns of Tsar Simeon, 894–927

ward of Emperor Basil I, he received an excellent education, gaining fluency in the Greek language and mastering the tenets of Hellenic rhetoric and philosophy, accomplishments that earned him the unofficial title of *Hemiargos* (the “Half-Greek”) among his Byzantine associates. He thereafter became a monastic novice and spent the rest of his residence at the imperial capital in religious study.<sup>3</sup> On returning to Bulgaria

during the second half of the 880s, he resided in a monastery outside Preslav and headed an extensive Greek-to-Slavic translation project. After his monastic vows were annulled and he was proclaimed *knyaz* in 893, Simeon retained an active personal interest in literary work.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the seemingly idyllic image projected by his monastic background and intellectual interests, Simeon probably played an active role in Boris's coup overthrowing his brother and placing himself on the throne.<sup>5</sup> He had personally witnessed the material grandeur and power of Byzantium and had imbibed the empire's philosophically sophisticated political and religious culture through firsthand immersion. His command of Byzantine realities was thorough, and he was proud to be considered "Half-Greek." Although the Byzantines who bestowed that title obviously emphasized the "Greek" aspects of his character, Simeon came to focus equally on the Bulgarian "half" by the time the successful coup brought him to power. He was committed to elevating the Bulgarian half to a level of parity with the Greek, both politically and culturally. Such a grandiose goal required that he be Bulgaria's ruler and the ultimate patron of all state political, cultural, military, and economic activities. He envisioned himself as some new "Moses," tasked with leading the Bulgarians to the "promised land" of imperial equality within Orthodoxy's all-encompassing political worldview.<sup>6</sup>

Within a year of his ascension to the throne, Simeon became embroiled in a trade dispute with Byzantium. When in 894 Byzantine Emperor Leo VI the Wise (886–912) made a very unwise decision negatively affecting Bulgarian commercial relations with the empire, the young ruler quickly raised an official protest. Leo, not taking his objection seriously, ignored it so Simeon felt compelled to resort to war for gaining redress.

Scholars have debated Simeon's motives for that decision. A common interpretation holds that the former monk was itching to commence hostilities with Byzantium in pursuit of expansive imperial ambitions, so he used the trade issue and Leo's snub of his protestations as convenient excuses.<sup>7</sup> No doubt concerns over cementing the support of the Bulgar and Slav warriors for the untested former cleric played a part, but grandiose imperial ambitions need not have been involved in the decision. Simeon simply may have appreciated the economic benefits derived from favorable commercial relations with Byzantium and was willing to fight to retain them. He also may have determined that he could not afford to be viewed as a submissive imperial client in the eyes of either his own

subordinates or the empire's leadership. The resort to war was a proclamation of Bulgaria's right to be accepted as an independent power whose interests could be ignored by outsiders only at grave risk.<sup>8</sup>

The contentious commercial issue that served as the *casus belli* for Simeon's first conflict with Byzantium was rooted in a case of nepotism at the Byzantine court. With interruptions during the times of Constantine V and Krum, the Bulgar state had enjoyed "most favored nation" trading status in Constantinople since Tervel's 716 treaty with Byzantium. Bulgar merchants possessed their own residence and market in the city's St. Mamas district, enjoying low customs duties and tax rates on selling their wares (mostly linens, honey, wax, and hides) and benefiting from direct access to goods flooding into Constantinople from all quarters of the empire, which they purchased cheaply from eastern traders.<sup>9</sup>

Early in 894 Stylianos Zaoutzes, Leo's most influential advisor and father of his current mistress, convinced the emperor to grant the Bulgarian commercial concession as a monopoly to two greedy businessmen who were his clients, along with permission for them to transfer the Bulgarian entrepôt from Constantinople to Thessaloniki. The detrimental impact of the resulting move on Bulgarian commerce was immediate. All the main trade routes from Bulgaria to the empire ran from the heart of the state in the east through Thrace or along the coast of the Black Sea. The shift of terminus from Constantinople, directly accessible in the east, to Thessaloniki, lying on Bulgaria's far off southwestern periphery, was disruptive at the very least. In addition, Bulgarian merchants now were forced to purchase imperial goods at inflated prices through the two new middlemen who, taking advantage of both their status as imperial commercial officials in Thessaloniki and the utter lack of direct oversight from the capital, also raised imposts on the Bulgarians' goods for their personal benefit. Responding to the just complaints of his merchants, Simeon made formal protests to Leo. Through indifference or arrogance, the emperor ignored them, leading Simeon to resort to military action for forcibly rectifying the harmed economic situation.<sup>10</sup>

In autumn 894 Simeon led his forces into imperial territory, where they systematically laid waste regions of the Macedonian theme in Adrianople's vicinity. The timing of Simeon's stroke was fortuitous. Most Byzantine first-line Balkan thematic troops, as well as the *tagmata*, had been transferred to Anatolia for a major offensive against the Tarsus Arabs. To meet Simeon's incursion, Leo had immediately available only

unseasoned, second-line thematic troops, bolstered by a contingent of his personal household guards, the *Hetaireia*, which included a unit of Khazar mercenaries. These were placed under the command of one Prokopios Krenites, who was seconded by the Armenian commander Kourtikios, and dispatched against the encroaching Bulgarians. Although more numerous than its enemy, the rag-tag imperial force was no match for Simeon's troops. Buoyed by successful plundering in the empire for the first time in 40 years, and eager to display their military prowess for their surprisingly aggressive new ruler, the Bulgarian warriors' morale was soaring. When the two armies collided somewhere near Adrianople, the Bulgarians swept the Byzantines from the field with great carnage. Both Krenites and Kourtikios, along with numerous subordinate officers, were killed and losses among the *Hetaireia*, the only professional imperial troops present, were extensive. Having avenged the blow to Bulgarian commercial interests, Simeon exacted an additional measure of revenge for the insult caused by Leo ignoring his official protests: He ordered the noses slit of the Khazar *Hetaireia* prisoners in his hands after the battle and sent them back to Constantinople as a gesture of dishonor for the emperor.<sup>11</sup>

Shortly after the battle Simeon withdrew his victorious army to Bulgaria without continuing operations in imperial territory. Why he did so is a matter of conjecture. Perhaps he thought his military triumph would force Leo to reinstate the old commercial order. More likely, however, Simeon's action was in response to a potential foreign threat to his state that reared its head to the north while he was campaigning in the south. That danger was posed by the Magyars, who were settled in the steppe country beyond Bulgaria's northeastern frontier.<sup>12</sup>

Nothing is known about Bulgar-Magyar relations after the "Macedonian" colony's escape in the mid-830s but this does not mean that none existed. In 862 and 881 the Magyars engaged the East Franks in western Pannonia, doing so in the latter year as allies of the Great Moravian Prince Svatopluk (870–894). Whether their treks to Pannonia from Etelköz on those occasions entailed passing through Bulgarian territories cannot be determined. In 892 and 894 they again appeared in Pannonia, doing so in the former year as allies of Frank Bavarian King Arnulf (887–899; Holy Roman emperor, 896–899) in his struggles against the Moravians, and in the latter as Svatopluk's allies against the Franks. During their 894 intervention the Magyars's operations may have posed direct threats to Bulgarian holdings along the Mureş River

in southern Transylvania, where numerous economically important salt mines were located.<sup>13</sup> Having returned to his realm on receiving news of Magyar threats, Simeon kept a watchful eye on his neighbors to the northeast. It probably was at this time that he ordered strong wicker water barricades erected along stretches of the Danube's Dobrudzhan southern bank to obstruct any Magyar crossing attempts into his state's heartland.<sup>14</sup>

Contrary to Simeon's expectations, Emperor Leo gave no thought to correcting the economic wrong he had dealt the Bulgarians. He instead was anxious to avenge the humiliating military defeat and mutilation of his personal guards suffered at Simeon's hands. Aware of the Magyars' propensity for accepting mercenary commissions through the empire's intelligence network, Leo turned to diplomacy aimed at forging an anti-Bulgarian military alliance with those strategically well-placed steppe warriors. In late 894 or early 895 he dispatched Niketas Skleros to the steppe country with a hefty shipment of gold under orders to secure the Magyars' assistance. Skleros entered into negotiations with their dual rulers, Kurszán (d. 904), the Magyars' *kende* or sacred prince, and Árpád (845/855–907), the *gyula* or second prince but supreme military and judicial commander, who recently had returned from fighting in Pannonia. An agreement was reached and the imperial ambassador swiftly embarked for Constantinople to have the planned military operation against Bulgaria initiated with the least possible delay.<sup>15</sup>

The arrangements made by Skleros probably followed a predetermined plan devised by the emperor prior to his mission. The Magyars were to invade Bulgaria through eastern Wallachia (where no Bulgarian forces were stationed), cross the Danube, and then push deep into Bulgarian Dobrudzha and the eastern Danubian Plain, inflicting as much devastation as possible on the land and its inhabitants while defeating any enemy forces encountered. Because they previously had not operated south of the Danube and were unfamiliar with the few fording sites, the imperial fleet would ferry the Magyars across, guard their rear while they carried out their depredations inside Bulgaria, and transport them back across the river when their campaign was concluded. Meanwhile, Leo looked to settle matters with the Arabs in Anatolia to free his veteran troops for transfer to Thrace, where they would occupy Simeon's attention along his southern border, thus permitting the Magyars to administer a crushing blow from the Bulgarians' rear. Once the Magyars returned north of the Danube, Leo would purchase their prisoners for

use as pawns in peace negotiations with a defeated Bulgarian foe. For the most part, the grand tactics involved played out as planned—except for the crucially important conclusion.

In 895 Leo won the desired truce with the Tarsus Arabs, permitting him to transfer forces from Anatolia to Thrace for use against Simeon. The imperial army gathered in his Balkan holdings comprised the returned first-line Thracian and Macedonian thematic units supported by elements of the *tagmata* and some Anatolian detachments. Nikephoros Phokas was brought to Thrace, promoted to the rank of domestic of the Schools, and placed in overall command of operations on land. Concurrently, the imperial fleet harbored in Constantinople was readied for its role in the campaign under the orders of its new admiral (*droungarios*), the patrician Evstathios. After the warships were fitted out and sufficient transport vessels were collected, the fleet set sail for the Danube and a rendezvous with the Magyars.

The large imperial force massed along Bulgaria's southern frontier in spring 895 caught and held Simeon's attention. The Bulgarian ruler, probably surprised that Leo had chosen to expand the warfare rather than rectify the economic grievance that had caused the outbreak of fighting, concentrated his troops in the south to face the looming threat posed by the Byzantine buildup. Prior to ordering Phokas to initiate hostilities, Leo, in a last minute effort to head off combat between the two Orthodox states, dispatched one of his officials to Preslav with a peace offering. Thinking that the offer was a ploy designed to lower his guard and permit Phokas to strike a more vulnerable opponent, Simeon refused to meet the emissary and had him thrown into prison.<sup>16</sup> Simeon having treated the proffered peace effort with disdain, Phokas commenced operations, penetrating the Great Fence and advancing into Bulgarian northern Thrace.

Despite the large size of Phokas's imperial army, its primary objective was to serve as a diversion in aid of the Magyar attack from the north by keeping the Bulgarians concentrated on actions south of the Balkan Mountains. No evidence exists supporting claims that the Byzantines aggressively attempted to break through the mountain passes and into Bulgaria's heartlands at any time during the campaign. Nor was there any mention in the sources of imperial efforts to force a decisive general engagement in Thrace to resolve the fighting. Instead, they claimed that Simeon was "dealing" with the Byzantines prior to the Magyars falling on his rear.<sup>17</sup> The most logical reason for the passive role played by the

Byzantine army throughout the campaign is that, because the agreement with the Tarsus Arabs was believed fragile, Leo and Phokas were wary of becoming militarily too deeply committed in Europe should the truce in the east collapse and significant forces be needed against the Arabs on short notice. The diversionary tactics they adopted provided the flexibility to meet such a situation if it arose. It was thought that the Magyars' blow to the Bulgarians' rear would compel Simeon to sue for peace.<sup>18</sup>

A horde of Magyar warriors, led by *gyula* Árpád's eldest son Levente (or Liüntika), arrived on the north bank of the Danube to the west of the delta sometime after Phokas began his demonstrations in the south. Although large, Levente's force represented only a part (albeit the greater) of the Magyars' total armed strength. Since the struggle between Moravia and the East Franks from the previous year continued into 895, and the Magyars remained committed to their Moravian allies, the rest of their troops were operating west of the Carpathian Mountains in Transylvania and Pannonia, where they most likely continued to harass Bulgarian possessions along the Mureş River.<sup>19</sup>

Having reached the Danube before the Byzantine fleet, Levente tried to wade his horses across the river, break through the wicker barriers blocking access to the south bank, and overcome the few Bulgarian guards stationed in the locale, but the obstructions held and the crossing attempt failed. So he waited on the north bank for the ships to arrive. The imperial flotilla soon reached the Magyar host and Evtathios ordered a detachment of marines, led by his chief oarsmen Michael Barkalas, to hack an opening in the wicker obstacles with axes. The marines accomplished their mission in the face of brief Bulgarian resistance, with Barkalas winning acclaim among the Magyar leaders for his bravery during the action. Soon after, the entire Magyar host was ferried across the river and deposited in northern Dobrudzha, from where it embarked on its mission of destruction inside Bulgaria.<sup>20</sup>

News of the Magyar incursion into his state's undefended heartlands rocked Simeon, who was taken completely by surprise. Faced with enemy threats to both his front and rear, the situation resembled those repeatedly imposed on the Bulgars by Constantine V that had nearly brought about the Bulgar state's total collapse. This time, the warriors plundering from the north were more ferocious and devastatingly effective than had been Constantine's thematic troops. Caught in a pincer, Simeon's position was desperate, and he could only respond in a desperate fashion. He swiftly deduced that the Magyars represented the most



dangerous threat—they were advancing rapidly and wreaking great carnage while the Byzantine offensive in the south appeared tentative, slow, and limited. Simeon decided to fight a holding action against the imperial forces, posting against them only enough troops to defend the barricaded mountain passes. The rest were forced-marched north to solidify a hastily assembled force, composed of able-bodied villagers called to arms in an emergency general levy, to oppose the steppe invaders.

When the Bulgarians and Magyars clashed somewhere on the rolling plain of southern Dobrudzha, Simeon's troops were smashed and swept from the field in disarray, with the victorious Magyars relentlessly pursuing and slaughtering those Bulgarian fugitives too slow or unable to outstrip them during the rout.<sup>21</sup> Simeon, his personal retinue, and many of his surviving troops found refuge within the battlements of the nearby Danubian fortress of Drüstūr (formerly called Dorostolon). The Magyars stormed southward across Dobrudzha and onto the eastern Danubian Plain, pillaging, plundering, and gathering prisoners as they went. Finally checked by the walled fortifications of Simeon's capital at Preslav (and not, as was later reported, by the monk and ex-ruler Boris's prayers and his proclamation of a three-day religious fast), Levente and his horde turned northward, laden with booty and captives, and headed back for the imperial fleet, which rode at anchor across the neck of the Danube's delta. As they returned through Dobrudzha, Simeon, still holed up in his river fortress, considered mustering a new force against them but thought better of it, permitting the Magyars to pass undisturbed. Word soon was sent to Constantinople by way of the fleet that the Magyars had been deposited north of the river and were anxious to sell their Bulgarian captives to Leo.<sup>22</sup>

On the heels of the Magyars' return journey, Simeon contacted Evstathios, the nearest Byzantine commander, requesting a truce and the opening of peace negotiations. The admiral forwarded the Bulgarian ruler's entreaties to the capital. Leo, who remained personally disturbed by deadly conflict between Orthodox Christians, responded favorably almost immediately. A more pragmatic reason for ending hostilities with Bulgaria was the need to free troops in the Balkans for use against renewed outside threats. The truce in the east had been shattered by an Arab invasion of imperial Armenian territories while, in Italy, the Franks were expanding into Byzantine possessions and had captured the city of Benevento. Leo hurriedly completed the purchase of the Magyars' Bulgarian prisoners and had them brought to Constantinople by

Evstathios's armada. At the same time, he ordered Nikephoros Phokas to cease operations in northern Thrace and withdraw his troops to the imperial capital's environs for transfer to regions under threat. A third missive was dispatched to Simeon announcing Leo's acceptance of his request for a truce and notifying him that an emissary shortly would arrive in Bulgaria to conduct final peace negotiations.<sup>23</sup>

Leo's hasty withdrawal of his land and naval forces opposing the Bulgarians before any peace agreement with them was negotiated proved a naive mistake that undid the campaign's success. In the interim between the retreat of imperial forces and the arrival of Leo's peace emissary, Simeon was unfettered by any threats of force or legal treaty constraints on his military policies and actions, even though a technical state of war persisted. He was not slow to capitalize on the situation. His army began being rebuilt as fugitive stragglers rallied and rejoined their units, recruitment for the various commanders' standing retinues was intensified, and a new general levy was implemented. Lost armaments were replaced and damaged equipment repaired. Most important, military allies were sought out and approached. In this last matter, Simeon demonstrated that he had learned Byzantine ways well during his stint in Constantinople.

Simeon knew that the Magyars, whom he considered the most immediate military threat, feared one group of people more than any other—the Pechenegs. It was said that the Pechenegs, roaming the plains to the east of Etelköz, were the fiercest of all known steppe peoples and had driven the Magyars into Etelköz after evicting them from Levidia.<sup>24</sup> Simeon realized the Pechenegs were strategically placed to serve his interests against the Magyars in the same manner that the Magyars had assisted Byzantium against him. Although source evidence is lacking, an embassy must have been organized and dispatched to the distant north-east in hopes of turning the tables on the empire and its potent steppe allies by gaining the Pechenegs' support.<sup>25</sup>

Soon after his emissaries departed for the steppe country, Simeon received word that Emperor Leo's envoy, the patrician Leo Khoirosphaktes, had arrived on the Thracian border seeking prompt conveyance to Preslav and a meeting with the prince. Simeon now had little interest in beginning immediate peace discussions since he was under no military constraint to do so. By delaying the negotiations for as long as possible, he gained time to strengthen his military capabilities at home and learn the fate of his mission to the Pechenegs. Simeon

ordered Khoirosphaktes be escorted to the fortress of Mundraga, southwest of Pliska, for confinement instead of to Preslav.<sup>26</sup> Once incarcerated in that stronghold, Khoirosphaktes was informed that Simeon deigned to conduct negotiations only through written correspondence. A more time-consuming process for peace talks could hardly have been imposed but, despite the Byzantine emissary's indignant protests, it was initiated and scrupulously followed throughout the subsequent negotiations.

As Simeon and Khoirosphaktes exchanged letters, it grew obvious to the imperial ambassador that the Bulgarian was stalling for time, and that his forced detention in a remote location rendered him powerless to change the situation. Such was as Simeon intended. He derived great pleasure from besting the empire at what it traditionally considered its own game—diplomacy. Khoirosphaktes exchanged 14 letters with Simeon during the months he spent negotiating for the elusive peace. Each time he submitted concrete terms for Simeon's consideration, the Bulgarian prince countered with petulant arguments about punctuation and wording, or with sarcastic criticisms of what he considered imperial pretensions, thereby forcing the frustrated ambassador to waste time refuting issues that possessed little actual relevance for the business at hand. In one exchange of correspondence treating prisoner exchange, Simeon blatantly expressed his pleasure in philosophically outwitting Khoirosphaktes while caustically berating Emperor Leo. In such manner matters interminably played out throughout the remaining months of the year.<sup>27</sup>

As the negotiations dragged on through summer and autumn 895, Simeon awaited word of his Pecheneg mission and continued honing his reconstituted army's military capabilities. Sometime in mid to late fall, he received the anticipated news that the Pechenegs had agreed to attack the Magyars' home encampments in Etelköz as soon as possible. Knowing that the truce with the empire would hold since few effective imperial troops remained in Thrace, he immediately gathered his forces, crossed the Danube, and marched northeastward against his Magyar enemy. Morale among the Bulgarians must have been high, given the cessation of fighting, the time spent in reorganizing, rearming, and retraining, and the prospect of gaining revenge for the devastating blows dealt them by the Magyars. When they came upon those steppe warriors, the ensuing battle was desperate and bloody and the Bulgarians emerged victorious.<sup>28</sup>

Details of the second Bulgarian-Magyar struggle in the extant sources are sketchy and generalized. The location of the battle may have been as

far south as the Wallachian flatlands above Dobrudzha or as far north as regions near the Dniester or Bug rivers. Whether the engagement was coordinated with the devastating assault of the Pechenegs on the Magyar encampments in Etelköz or was an independent action that merely counted on benefiting from the simultaneous Pecheneg incursion cannot be determined. All that can be concluded from the extant evidence is that the Magyars in Etelköz were overwhelmed by the combined blows of the Bulgarians and Pechenegs. Those who escaped injury or capture fled westward, eventually joining the Magyar warriors returning from Pannonia and Transylvania at the close of campaigning season. Learning that the Pechenegs had overrun and begun settling Etelköz, the rulers Kurszán and Árpád decided that a return to Pannonia and Transylvania with the entire Magyar population was the best available option, concluding from first-hand knowledge that those territories were theirs for the taking. The Magyars abandoned Etelköz to the Pechenegs, passed over the Carpathian Mountains, and began settling in Transylvania and eastern Pannonia. In short order they tore southern Transylvania and most of Pannonia from Bulgarian control and brought the local Slav, Bulgar, and Avar inhabitants of the regions under their authority. Within five years they eliminated the Great Moravian state altogether and established a permanent homeland of their own.<sup>29</sup>

Simeon had little time for concern about the long-term consequences for his distant northwestern holdings in driving the Magyars from his northeastern borders. He hastened back to Preslav and the protracted peace talks with Khoirosphaktes. Although bloodied, his army was battle-hardened and buoyed by victory while that of the empire's in Thrace was thinned of veteran troops for operations in Anatolia and largely composed of second-line thematic militia. More important, the empire's Magyar "Damocles sword" was sheathed and removed to Pannonia while the Pechenegs technically were Bulgarian allies and could be depended on to remain so for the foreseeable near future. The crisis of 895 was over for Simeon. All that remained was to end the truce with Byzantium by dictating the terms of the peace settlement.

Khoirosphaktes soon came to understand the realities of the changed diplomatic situation. Simeon imposed demands in return for peace. Most of these remain unknown because the Byzantine sources expediently ignored the embarrassing consequences of the empire's botched military and diplomatic actions at the end of the campaign. Khoirosphaktes, in no position to haggle over Simeon's peace terms (whatever they may

have been), notified Emperor Leo, who accepted the proposals and requested that his ambassador return to Constantinople in company with a Bulgarian delegation for signing a formal peace treaty ending the conflict. In early 896 Khoirosphaktes and a Bulgarian embassy, headed by Simeon's *kayhan*, Teodor, traveled to the imperial capital, where final touches were made to the settlement and arrangements started for exchanging the Byzantine and Bulgarian captives.<sup>30</sup>

Although again source evidence is lacking, it appears that the arrangements for conducting the prisoner exchange broke down or experienced problems in implementation that angered the Bulgarian ruler. Simeon came to think that not all of his men in Byzantine hands were being returned. Whether he made formal but unsuccessful protestations to Leo is unknown. What is known is that, by late spring 896, Bulgarian troops were raiding imperial territories in the Macedonian theme and Leo felt constrained to evict them by force. The emperor transferred the first-line Thracian and Macedonian thematic units back to their home regions for use against Simeon's raiders. The renowned general Nikephoros Phokas no longer was in command of imperial forces since Leo's still influential advisor, Stylianos Zaoutzes, had him ousted as domestic of the Schools and replaced with Leo Katakalon, a far less able general and, therefore, less threatening to that power-wary counselor.<sup>31</sup> It was summer by the time Katakalon, assisted by his subordinate Theodosios, had the reinforced Balkan thematic troops prepared for active campaigning and combined with tagmatic units from the capital and some Anatolian thematic detachments. With his army at full strength, he marched against the marauding Bulgarians. Apprised of the situation, Simeon concentrated his troops to meet him.

The two hosts came to blows in Thrace near a Byzantine fortress, located on the Diagonal highway some distance southeast of Adrianople, called Boulgarophygon (Gr: "Bulgar's Bridge"; near m: Babaeski). Theodosios was killed in the fighting and the imperial army utterly crushed and routed by the Bulgarian warriors, suffering its worst defeat since that inflicted by Krum in 811. Byzantine losses were heavy, with thousands of officers and men killed, wounded, or captured. Katakalon escaped those fates by fleeing to the nearby fortress for safety. Simeon, having gathered a new crop of prisoners from the battle, marched his army toward Constantinople, confident that no effective Byzantine contingents remained in the field against him. Although he probably understood that he had little chance of successfully assaulting the fortress-city,

by advancing to its walls he at least could lay much of the empire's Thracian countryside to waste and instill fear of his rejuvenated power among the imperial leadership and population. Emperor Leo duly was alarmed. With no organized military force readily at hand beyond some tagmatic detachments and his personal guards, he mobilized the city's inhabitants, including some resident captive Muslim Arabs, to man the walls and sent a request for renewed peace talks to Simeon.<sup>32</sup>

Satisfied with developments, Simeon responded favorably. Once again, Leo dispatched Khoirosphaktes to negotiate on his behalf. The subsequent discussions were protracted, despite Simeon's obviously superior negotiating position. By the time the peace settlement was finalized and signed sometime in late 896 or early 897, Simeon's material gains appeared relatively modest. The pre-894 trade relationship between the two states was reinstated, including the Bulgarian market house's return from Thessaloniki to Constantinople. All remaining Bulgarian prisoners in imperial hands were exchanged for some 25,000 Byzantine captives held by Simeon. Leo agreed to pay annual tribute to the Bulgarian ruler and turned over to him as well some small outpost districts along the common border in Thrace<sup>33</sup> Simeon's immaterial gains, however, were significant. He had wrung victory from the jaws of initial defeat by vanquishing two allied enemy armies in the field and diplomatically humbling the empire in the peace discussions. His control of most of the Balkans was confirmed, and the Byzantine emperor had been forced to treat him with the respect due a near equal and not as some lowly dependent princeling whose interests Byzantium could arbitrarily ignore. Among his own subjects, the former monk had proven his metal as an exceptional political leader and outstanding military commander, thus cementing their loyalty, obedience, and awe, which would remain steadfast among them throughout the rest of his reign, despite the travails that those years entailed.

Having won commercial redress and the recovery of his captured subjects, Simeon withdrew from Byzantine territory shortly after concluding peace. He soon turned to repairing the wreckage caused by the Magyar incursion, refilling his depleted treasury with funds from the newly bestowed tribute and dividends from restored trade, and pursuing in earnest those domestic cultural and infrastructural initiatives for which his reign would win lasting renown.

During the following decade and a half, Preslav, Simeon's seat of power, evolved into a grand center of Slavic Orthodox culture and

commerce, the likes of which had never previously been witnessed within Bulgaria. Its large stone structures, sumptuous decorations, towering battlements, and thriving merchant and artisan quarters made a wondrous impression on his subjects, whose mundane lives were largely centered on the small towns and forts sprinkled around the state or the even smaller and more common rural villages, whose buildings were modest in size, paltry in construction, and meager in decoration by comparison. The leading literary figure working in the capital during the late ninth and early tenth centuries, Ioan Ekzarh, penned a glowing description of the magnificent impact that Preslav and Simeon's court made on the minds of average Bulgarians. In vivid verbal imagery, the capital's walls, gates, buildings, churches, and palace were presented in all their structural and decorative glory. At the center of it all sat Simeon, on a "high" throne in his palace, "dressed in his gold-woven mantle, wearing a golden necklace, girded with a velvet belt, his shoulders sprinkled with pearls, girded with a golden sword... with bracelets on his arms," surrounded by his *bolyar* notables, garbed in "golden necklaces, belts, and bracelets."<sup>34</sup> The apotheosis of the ex-monk into a glorious monarch *à la Byzance* seemed a fitting metaphor for the transformation of Bulgaria from a struggling semi-barbarian state into a flourishing Orthodox Christian European power.

The period separating the end of hostilities by early 897 and their renewed and more extensive outbreak beginning in 913 often is characterized as a time of peace between Bulgaria and Byzantium. While such a depiction generally is accurate, evidence suggests that Simeon undertook limited military actions against the empire during the first decade of the tenth century aiming to further extend Bulgaria's southwestern borders toward the Adriatic and Aegean. In a letter written by Leo Khoirosphaktes, he claimed to have negotiated with Simeon in late 901 or early 902 for the return of 30 small forts and fortresses that the Bulgarians recently had taken in the Albanian hinterlands of Dyrrakhion.<sup>35</sup> The context for their transfer remains unknown but it was probably linked to Bulgarian military actions along the two states' frontier in the vicinity. In 904 a new round of talks led to the expansion of Bulgaria's southwestern border in Macedonia.

War with Simeon during the 890s had weakened the empire in its struggles with the Arabs, particularly with regard to Sicily. In August 902 that island fell to the Arabs and the empire's Adriatic and Aegean coastlines were laid open to Arab naval threats. Although Byzantium's

thematic fleets were operative, they could not be everywhere at all times to protect the coastal regions against attacks from enemy flotillas sailing out of Levantine and Sicilian ports. The inability to check the incursions of Arab sea raiders hindered Byzantium's ability to secure its rear in the ongoing struggles with the Arabs in eastern Anatolia and Armenia, resulting in indecisive military efforts on all fronts.<sup>36</sup>

In 904 the empire was rocked by a particularly devastating blow inflicted by a marauding Arab fleet from Syria commanded by Leo Tripolites, a former Orthodox Greek who had turned renegade and converted to Islam under the adopted name of Gulam Zurafa. He first raided the Aegean coast of Anatolia and then sailed through the Dardanelles into the Sea of Marmara, where he was repulsed by the imperial fleet. Instead of returning to his home base, he sailed for Thessaloniki, Byzantium's second largest city and primary Aegean port. The surprise arrival of the Arab fleet found the city's defense walls in ill repair, particularly those facing the sea. Tripolites immediately set about laying siege to the city and, on 31 July, after only three days of investment, he broke through the sea walls. There ensued a week of savagery, during which half of Thessaloniki's inhabitants were killed or captured, many of its structures damaged, and most of its valuables looted. Tripolites sailed off safely to Tarsus, where he exchanged his thousands of captives for Arab prisoners of war held by the Byzantines.<sup>37</sup>

Word of the disastrous event reached Simeon, who realized it offered an unexpected opportunity to expand his domains in southern Macedonia. Soon after signing the peace with Simeon in 896/897 and prior to the sack of Thessaloniki, Emperor Leo had hoped to stymie Bulgarian efforts in that regard by reorganizing the empire's border themes facing Bulgaria. As part of that process, the theme of Thessaloniki was augmented to its east by a new Strymon theme encompassing much of Western Thrace, which previously formed part of the Macedonian theme. While the restructuring theoretically offered increased force flexibility, the Arab strike at the great port-city had demonstrated that, in reality, the thematic troops in the themes of Thessaloniki and Strymon were ineffectual in a military crisis. Moreover, the Slavic populations in those themes displayed their questionable loyalty to the empire during the emergency by not responding to appeals for volunteers issued by the military authorities.<sup>38</sup> Simeon deduced that the military and demographic situations in southern Macedonia were favorable for active Bulgarian intervention.



A military expedition was dispatched to Macedonia to take advantage of the disarray among imperial forces in the area. The Bulgarians flooded down from the region's mountainous interior toward the level coastal plain, gathering support from local Slavic inhabitants as they advanced. Resistance was weak and there appeared to be nothing to prevent them from marching straight into devastated and defenseless Thessaloniki. The imperial authorities, still numb from the disaster's aftereffects, were hamstrung in organizing an effective military response to the new Bulgarian threat. A desperate Emperor Leo turned to Leo Khoirosphaktes for the fourth time and sent him to Simeon hoping to stop the Bulgarian advance before it reached the Aegean port-city. Probably given a great deal of leeway by the emperor regarding terms to attain the goal, Khoirosphaktes appeased Simeon in record time, promising him enough gains to convince him to halt. The fourth treaty negotiated between Simeon and Leo resulted in the Bulgarian ruler being generously compensated. His authority over long-held territorial acquisitions in Macedonia and Albania was recognized, and he was bestowed with additional lands in the southern districts of both regions, creating a broad Bulgarian corridor to the Adriatic south of Dyrrakhion that included the town of Kastoria (B: Kostūr). In exchange, Simeon forewent occupying Thessaloniki. The southern Macedonian border separating Bulgaria and the empire was pushed to within 14 miles (22 km) of that city, where in the village of Naresh (m: Nea Philadelphia) commemorative stone boundary markers were erected. Bulgaria now controlled the entire Struma River valley north of the coastal plain and virtually all of the Slavic groups inhabiting the Macedonian and Albanian regions lying south and west of Ohrid.<sup>39</sup>

Just as events affecting Byzantium in the sphere of militant foreign relations with the Arabs led to Bulgarian territorial expansion in the south-central and southwestern Balkans, developments of a more personal nature in the empire's domestic affairs ultimately contributed to the outbreak of serious hostilities between the two states in 913 that lasted for 14 years, ending only with Simeon's death in 927.

Emperor Leo had inherited from his father Basil I a governing precept stressing dynastic stability through a process of indisputable family succession. As his reign progressed, however, Leo found himself disconcertingly bereft of a male heir, leading him to contract four successive marriages in a desperate attempt to produce a legitimate successor—a *porphyrogenetos*—to the throne, despite the fact that any beyond a

second nuptial was illegal in the Orthodox empire's civil and canon laws. In the end, Leo achieved his objective after his mistress (later fourth wife)—Zoë Karbonopsina (“With Coal-Black Eyes”)—gave him a son, Constantine VII, in 905. Success required Leo to play off the Roman Catholic pope against his own Orthodox patriarch and friend, Nicholas Mystikos (901–907, 912–925), in having his last marriage and offspring legitimized, but it came at the cost of tearing bitter rifts in the empire's political and religious leadership.<sup>40</sup> The impact of Leo's nuptial and succession problems within the empire's governing circles had significant consequences for Byzantium's foreign relations with Bulgaria.

Among the members of the opposition to Leo was his brother and co-emperor, Alexander. Leo managed to win his acceptance of baby Constantine as a junior co-emperor. When Leo died in May 912, Constantine was only seven years old and sickly so, as the senior imperial partner, Alexander (912–913) ascended the throne. Already suffering from a terminal illness and addicted to a libertine lifestyle, his reign was short—13 months—and characterized by only two initiatives of note: His attempt to overturn most of his late brother's domestic agenda by overtly favoring members of the former opposition (e.g., Nicholas Mystikos was reinstated as patriarch); and, in foreign affairs, he discontinued the peace arrangements made by Leo with Bulgaria by refusing to pay Simeon the annual tribute specified in the 896/897 treaty.<sup>41</sup>

After learning of Leo's demise, in spring 913 Simeon dispatched a delegation to Constantinople offering the usual formal condolences and congratulations to the new emperor, inquiring whether he intended to maintain the peace, and requesting the continuation of the tribute payment. Alexander treated the Bulgarian emissaries insultingly, boasting that he wanted no more treaties, would pay no further tribute, and shouting insults to the Bulgarian prince.<sup>42</sup> Angered by their reception at the imperial court, the envoys immediately departed for Preslav and informed Simeon of the emperor's attitude and their treatment. Incensed in turn by his delegates' tale, Simeon determined to teach the new imperial despot the same lesson that he had his brother in 894: It was dangerous for the empire to take Bulgarian state interests too lightly. Simeon began actively preparing for war with Byzantium.

Simeon's aims in initiating hostilities in 913 have been presented by scholars as “stated facts” rather than matters of debate. The most commonly propounded is the notion that he desired to attain the Byzantine imperial throne and then rule over a joint Byzantine-Bulgarian Orthodox

empire encompassing the Balkans and Anatolia. This assertion finds support in the fact that, in the last three years of his reign, Simeon began titling himself “Emperor of the Bulgarians and Romans,” as well as in favorable interpretations of passages treating Simeon’s supposed objectives in the many letters sent him by Patriarch Nicholas Mystikos.<sup>43</sup> An alternative statement is that he sought to force the Byzantine authorities to recognize him officially as an Orthodox Christian emperor ruling an existing Bulgarian empire equal in standing to their own, an aim that he held since ascending the throne. Evidence bolstering this assertion is found in Simeon’s official use of the titles *tsar* and *basilevs* (Sl and Gr, respectively: “emperor”) after 913, the great amount of resources he invested in transforming his capital at Preslav into a magnificent showcase of independent state power unparalleled anywhere in Eastern Europe outside of Constantinople, and, once again, favorable interpretations of passages in Mystikos’s letters.<sup>44</sup>

While either one or both of the above objectives may have evolved in Simeon’s mind during the 14 years of contention that erupted in 913, his initial aims may have been simply to reinstate the tribute payments from the empire and to punish insolent Emperor Alexander for the insults suffered at his hands. Simeon understood the prestigious symbolism attached to being the recipient of an annual imperial subsidy. Moreover, the tribute he received greatly contributed to keeping his treasury supplied with funds (since he minted no coinage of his own), helping him to patronize the activities that glorified his capital and himself and to maintain the continued loyalty of his *bolyar* elite through the distribution of royal largess. Simeon had no desire to lose such an important source of state income and was willing to fight to retain its payment. If the haughty emperor was humiliated in the process, so much the better.<sup>45</sup>

As Simeon gathered his forces against Byzantium, Alexander died in June 913 without an heir, sparking a leadership crisis in the empire. His co-emperor, Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos (913–959), at eight years of age, was too young to rule in his own right. Prior to his death, and at the urging of Patriarch Mystikos, Alexander had expelled the young co-emperor’s mother Zoë from the palace and confined her to a nunnery. Within days of the emperor’s demise, Nicholas, anxious to retain his influence and power, instigated the Domestic of the Schools Constantine Doukas to seize the throne to prevent Zoë, who hated the patriarch for his opposition to her marriage to Leo and who possessed an

extensive network of followers, from returning as regent for her underage son. Doukas was then in the midst of organizing the Thracian and Macedonian thematic forces and mustering the tagmatic units to meet the threatening Bulgarian offensive. By the time he arrived in the capital to carry out the coup, however, Mystikos's political situation fundamentally had changed. At the last minute, Alexander designated his young nephew as heir, under a regency council headed by the patriarch and with the child's mother excluded. Now essentially serving as imperial head-of-state, Mystikos had no further need of Doukas and put down his coup attempt with the support of troops and courtiers sympathetic to young Constantine. The domestic of the Schools was killed in the fighting and the patriarch ordered many of Doukas's followers, including a number of high-ranking military officers from the European themes, executed in the failed coup's immediate wake.<sup>46</sup>

The coup's aftermath threw the empire's European military forces into disorder. Their top leaders were executed and nobody was certain who was in actual command. As a result, when in August 913 Simeon advanced into imperial territory, he faced little organized opposition and marched directly to the walls of Constantinople unimpeded. Having decapitated the empire's military arm in Europe, Mystikos's only recourse in attempting to repulse the Bulgarian threat was trying to reason with Simeon in hopes of convincing him to cease his incursion. In a series of letters sent him by the harried patriarch, dating from just prior to his invasion to his appearance before the capital's walls, Mystikos decried Simeon's "tyranny" (i.e., in Byzantine terms, his "rebellion" against the lawful imperial authority within the Orthodox Christian world), bemoaned the sinfulness of Christians warring on Christians, decried the human and material wastefulness of war, flattered Simeon as a model Orthodox Christian ruler, and offered to reinstate the tribute payments.<sup>47</sup> Although Simeon continued his advance on Constantinople, once he arrived before its walls subsequent events hint at the possibility that Mystikos's arguments may have exerted some influence on him.

After staging demonstrations outside Constantinople's walls, from Blakhernai to the Golden Gate, Simeon ordered his troops into camp near the Hebdomon Palace, located a short distance from the city on the shore of the Sea of Marmara. Instead of conducting fruitless siege attempts (since he had no navy) or assaults, messengers, led by Kavhan Teodor, were sent into Constantinople proposing negotiations. The regency council, shaken by the appearance of the large Bulgarian force

outside the city, received Simeon's solicitation with relief and readily agreed. As head regent, Mystikos conducted the discussions with the Bulgarian *kavhan* and a series of meetings took place to craft an agreement for resolving the situation that both parties could accept. When the talks unofficially achieved their goal, Mystikos and his fellow regents, along with the child-emperor Constantine, hosted a reception at the Blakhernai Palace for two of Simeon's sons, Mihail and a very young Petŭr, who accompanied him on the campaign. The next day Mystikos journeyed to the Hebdomon for a face-to-face meeting with Simeon, at which the agreement was officially ratified. Satisfied with the results, Simeon led his army back to Bulgarian territory.<sup>48</sup>

Despite later Byzantine disclaimers that no formal peace treaty was negotiated with Simeon in 913, the reality was that there had been, otherwise the Bulgarian ruler would not have ended his unopposed military operations and returned home. The annual tribute payments were reinstated, just as Mystikos had promised.<sup>49</sup> By the time he had ensconced himself at the Hebdomon, Simeon's ambition in conducting his invasion had expanded beyond the simple acquisition of tribute. Perhaps Mystikos's incessant flattery in his letters as a model Orthodox Christian ruler, coupled with the flourishing commercial, cultural, and intellectual developments that had taken root in his capital, as well as the deference shown him by the regency council once he broached the possibility for negotiations, all resulted in Simeon concluding that his maximum political objective was attainable. He demanded that the imperial authorities officially acknowledge him as an Orthodox emperor, ruling a Slavic Orthodox Bulgarian Empire holding sway over most of the Balkans. The intimidated regency, headed by a patriarch who possessed little personal loyalty to the child-emperor Constantine but an overriding determination to retain ultimate ecclesiastical authority over the Orthodox church in Bulgaria, acceded to his unprecedented demand. To cement such recognition, a betrothal was arranged for a marriage between the young Emperor Constantine and one of Simeon's daughters. The wedding would represent a blatant public statement of the two imperial states' equality in status.<sup>50</sup>

The crowning event of the peace negotiations—literally, in this case—occurred at the Hebdomon during the meeting between Simeon and Mystikos. At one point in the proceedings, in full view and to the acclamations of both parties' retinues, the patriarch conducted some sort of formal coronation of Simeon, a significant event since the Hebdomon Palace traditionally was used as the location for proclaiming or crowning

Byzantium's emperors. What the coronation of Simeon by Mystikos actually signified, however, remains uncertain to this day. There are four interpretations of the event's meaning.<sup>51</sup> One is that Simeon was adopted as the emperor's spiritual son. A second is that he was bestowed the rank of caesar, as Tervel had been by Justinian II two centuries earlier. A third view is that, since young Constantine was betrothed to one of Simeon's daughters, he was crowned as the official imperial father-in-law—the *basileopater*. The fourth, and most probable, interpretation is that Mystikos crowned Simeon emperor of the Bulgarians. It certainly was a title—*tsar*, in Slavic—that Simeon used after the event and it made perfect sense now that Bulgaria indisputably was a large and powerful Orthodox Christian state.<sup>52</sup>

The Byzantines' political philosophy permitted them to accept, albeit grudgingly and rarely, an imperial title for certain non-Byzantine rulers (i.e., for Charlemagne at the beginning of the ninth century) because they held that, no matter the titles of others, the Byzantine emperor was the divinely ordained supreme authority figure on earth. The fly in the ointment for Simeon was that his new imperial title was conferred by a weak regency council and not by a sitting emperor. The policies and decisions of a regency could be seriously questioned within imperial governing circles and, in this case, they were. Although the empire's governing elite was glad that the menacing Bulgarian ruler and his plundering warriors had departed imperial territory, most resented the terms granted him as inducement to decamp, specifically the bestowal of an imperial crown and the contracted imperial betrothal. Opposition to the regency council in Constantinople grew vocal and swelled until, in February 914, Mystikos and his coregents were overthrown by Zoë, emerging from confinement, and her irate followers. She immediately took control and cleaned house, replacing the sitting regents with her devoted partisans, but circumstances forced her to retain Mystikos as patriarch, despite her personal ill feelings toward him.

Once established as head of a new regency government, Zoë abrogated the terms of the treaty with Simeon. Both the coronation and the betrothal were declared null and void. The mother-regent categorically refused to countenance official recognition of Simeon's standing as equal to that of her imperial son. Nor would she permit young Constantine to be degraded in status by marrying the offspring of a "half-Greek" opportunist. To complete her total refutation of the treaty, Zoë terminated the payment of annual tribute to Preslav.<sup>53</sup>

On learning of the change of government in Byzantium and the new regency's repudiation of his gains from the previous year, Simeon understandably was upset. He could not ignore the insult to his standing and prestige, or the blow to his treasury, posed by the unilateral revocation of the treaty's terms by Zoë and her governing minions. For the third time since gaining the throne, the outraged Bulgarian ruler determined to teach the imperial authorities to consider seriously Bulgarian state interests when framing policies affecting the two states' bilateral relations or face dire military consequences. He mustered his forces for a new incursion into Byzantine territory.

By late summer 914 Simeon led his men into the empire, where, experiencing little opposition, they set to ravaging the countryside in the Thracian and Macedonian themes and laid siege to strategically important Adrianople. Simeon also had his men force the local population to pay him tribute as "emperor" while he leveled demands on Zoë's government to reinstate the Hebdomon treaty. To force them to accept his wishes, in September he captured the Macedonian theme's capital by bribing its Armenian commander, Pankratoukas, to open Adrianople's gates to his troops. Shortly after learning of the city's fall, Zoë dispatched two high-ranking delegates to Simeon, who, according to Byzantine sources, ultimately were able "to buy it back again with gold and many gifts."<sup>54</sup> Some scholars take the sources literally and hold that Simeon (or possibly his occupying garrison commander) sold Adrianople back to Byzantium before retiring behind his border and continuing military operations in the following year. Others interpret the wording as typical Byzantine rhetoric shielding the fact that Zoë's government was constrained to reinstate the terms of the 913 treaty in return for Simeon handing back the city and ceasing his depredations in imperial territory. The "gold and many gifts," therefore, probably constituted the prompt payment of the annual tribute due the Bulgarian ruler (i.e., the "gold") along with the Byzantine authorities' recognition of his imperial title and the betrothal (i.e., the "gifts").

Having forced Zoë's regency-government to accept, however grudgingly, the terms of the 913 treaty, the Bulgarians returned to Bulgaria, but the bad blood between the Bulgarian ruler and the mother-regent remained. Although circumstances compelled Zoë to comply formally with the peace accord, her attitude toward Simeon and the concessions made to him had not changed. For his part, Simeon must have been fully aware of that fact. Relations between the two empires during the years

immediately following the Adrianople settlement were tense. Simeon had the most to lose by violating the peace, a fact that runs counter to the generally held scholarly contention that he continued aggressive warfare against the empire in 915 and 916. Given Zoë's adamant opposition to the two important concessions granted him beyond simple tribute, he was uncertain whether the empire would fully comply with the commitments they entailed. Simeon thus faced two paramount questions regarding the state of affairs with Byzantium after Adrianople: Would Zoë permit the wedding of her son to his daughter; and would she secretly begin maneuvering to gain advantages for renewed warfare to defeat him decisively and render his imperial title meaningless?

To address those issues, Simeon exerted military pressure on Byzantium in an effort to convince the regent-governors that fulfilling their treaty obligations was in their best interests. During 915 and 916 he conducted active demonstrations along his borders with the empire in the vicinities of Thessaloniki and Dyrrakhion, where potential opportunities for territorial expansion existed, without escalating those operations into full-blown hostilities. At the same time, he dispatched delegations to the Pechenegs aimed at forming an alliance that would threaten Byzantine holdings in the Crimea around Kherson. If Simeon hoped that such actions would prod the imperial authorities to adhere to the peace terms, he was mistaken. They apparently steered Zoë's government to manufacture a justification for an all-out effort to defeat him and destroy his independent state, thereby reincorporating most of the Balkan Peninsula into the Byzantine Empire.<sup>55</sup>

Possibly starting as early as 915 but certainly by the opening of 917, Zoë's government attempted to forge a grand military coalition with the Pechenegs, the Raškan Serbs, and the Magyars that would expose Bulgaria to attack from all sides and almost certainly lead to its utter collapse. Imperial agents, accompanied by the requisite supplies of gold, were sent to the leaders of the three desired allies. Their missions' success varied. The embassy to the Magyars apparently failed since those Pannonian warriors played no known role in the events of 917. That dispatched through Leo Rabdoukhos, *strategos* of Dyrrakhion, to the recently Christianized Serbs of Raška enjoyed more success but ultimately proved of only marginal assistance. Raškan Serbia at the time was ruled by Knez (Prince) Petr Gojniković (892–917), technically a Bulgarian ally since 897, but unhappy in that role.<sup>56</sup> Rabdoukhos offered Petr money and an imperial guarantee of increased independence



in return for his joining the empire against Bulgaria. Unfortunately for both Petr and the Byzantines, the Raškan prince earlier had made an enemy of his neighbor, Knez Mihajlo Višević (910–930?), Christian Serb ruler of Zahumlje (m: Hercegovina) and Duklja (m: Montenegro), by encroaching on his territories, and Mihajlo was a loyal ally of Simeon since 912. Višević informed the Bulgarian *tsar* of Petr's dealings with the Byzantines, and that knowledge, combined with the inaction of the Magyars, helped prevent Gojniković from actively participating in the operations against Simeon when they counted.<sup>57</sup>

The regency-government's efforts to enlist the Pechenegs against Simeon offered Byzantium the greatest dividends. Not only did those steppe warriors occupy a similar strategic location relative to Bulgaria as had the Magyars in the 890s, they were renowned for their ferocity and infamous for their ravenous greed. Despite Simeon's repeated attempts to win them over to his side following the Adrianople agreement, when it came to a bidding war for their allegiance, he possessed few resources to compete with the Byzantines. In 895 he had gained their support against the Magyars by offering them Etelköz as the primary inducement. He had no such equivalent to offer against Byzantium. As for cash bribes, his treasury, although fuller than in 895, was significantly dependent for income on Byzantine tribute, which meant he had little hope of matching Byzantium in an auction for Pecheneg assistance. Simeon did have daughters, and he may have unsuccessfully attempted to negotiate a marriage of one into a leading Pecheneg clan. If such were attempted, there is no way of knowing why it failed. When Zoë's government initiated a concerted diplomatic effort to forge a Pecheneg alliance, Simeon lay at a distinct disadvantage.<sup>58</sup>

John Bogas, *strategos* of Kherson, monitored Simeon's diplomatic contacts with the neighboring Pechenegs and kept the regency-government fully apprised of developments. Beyond spying, he conducted efforts to counteract those of the Bulgarian ruler, including arranging direct meetings of Pecheneg delegations with the imperial authorities in Constantinople, where they certainly were favorably impressed by Byzantium's wealth and power.<sup>59</sup> Meanwhile, Byzantine military fortunes in both the east and the west had turned for the better. In 915 the Arabs were defeated in Armenia and those in the west driven from Calabria in southern Italy. Although they continued to raid Anatolia during the following year, by 917 Zoë won a truce with the Tarsus and Melitene Arabs, thus freeing Anatolian troops for use in the Balkans. The

regency-government then concentrated undivided attention on dealing with Bulgaria and its detested ruler.<sup>60</sup>

By summer 917 the Byzantine authorities considered everything in place for a decisive offensive to crush their Bulgarian competitor for Balkan hegemony. Although the Magyars' participation in the grand alliance was questionable, the Raškan Serbs were on board and the truce with the eastern Arabs was holding. Bogas hammered out an agreement with the eastern Pecheneg tribes in exchange for cash gifts and promises of unrestrained future plunder.<sup>61</sup> A grand tactical plan also was concocted. Some Anatolian thematic forces, including Armenians under their commander Melias, were transferred to Europe and united with the Thracian and Macedonian *themata* and the *tagmata*. While Gojniković and his Serbs kept Simeon occupied with diversionary raids on Bulgaria's western frontier, the main Byzantine army would advance northward along the Black Sea coast, penetrate Bulgaria's southern border, and march to Mesembria (controlled by Byzantium), where it would be re-supplied by the imperial fleet for a drive over the Balkan Mountains on Simeon's capital at Preslav. Simultaneously, Bogas was to guide the allied Pechenegs to the north bank of the Danube, where the Byzantine fleet would ferry them to Dobrudzha for a destructive sweep through Bulgaria's heartlands. The plan resembled that of Leo VI in 895 but with some significant differences: Pressure on Bulgaria was to be exerted from three directions rather than two; this time the Byzantine army would play an active offensive role and not serve merely as a diversion; and the Pechenegs were more fearsome than the Magyars. Total victory seemed assured so long as everything went according to plan.

All did not unfold as Zoë's government intended. The Magyars, diverted by their own operations against the Franks in central Europe and, perhaps, by Pecheneg raids from western Etelköz, did not participate in the Byzantine-planned offensive. Source evidence is lacking for explaining the failure of Gojniković's Serbs to conduct their expected diversionary raids. Perhaps having been forewarned by Višević, Simeon took steps to nip the Raškan threat in the bud, but exactly how he did so remains unknown. In any event, Gojniković's Serbs played no role of note in the 917 Byzantine campaign. Despite the loss of its Magyar and Serb components, however, the imperial grand tactical plan retained the potential for inflicting a devastating blow on the Bulgarians by squashing them in a pincers between the imperial army advancing on their front and the Pechenegs falling on their rear.

By the end of July 917 a large Byzantine army, consisting of some 30,000 troops from the Balkan and Anatolian themes as well as the tagmatic units, was assembled on the Plain of Diabasis in Thrace and placed under the command of Leo Phokas, domestic of the Schools and son of the late Nikephoros Phokas, who had faced Simeon in 895.<sup>62</sup> Battle-tested and distinguished officers and notables held commands or staff positions under him. In the *tagmata*, Olbian Marsoules headed the *Hikanatoi* and John Grapson commanded the *Exkoubitoi*. Other units were in the hands of the Argyros brothers, Leo and Romanos, and Bardas Phokas, brother of Leo Phokas and father of the future emperor, Nikephoros II Phokas. Melias led the Armenian contingent while the patrician Constantine Lips served as an aid and advisor to the army's commander-in-chief. Such an array of competent, known "fighters" probably was necessary to counterbalance Leo Phokas's shortcomings as a commander. Although he was technically a good soldier, he lacked his father's intellectual skills and mental vision that could make him an effective, let alone exceptional, general. He was, however, a scion of a powerful patrician family (as were most of his officers), the brother-in-law of a leading official in the regency-government, and a favorite of Zoë, all of which contributed to his receiving the supreme command of the empire's land forces for the campaign.<sup>63</sup>

To strengthen the army's morale, the regency-government made certain that the troops were paid, and clergymen from the capital were sent to the camps bearing the relic of the True Cross from the extensive collection of sacred items housed in the Great Palace. In each unit's encampment, the men gathered for ceremonies venerating the holy object and swore an oath to die for one another, if need be, in the coming conflict.<sup>64</sup> Paid and spiritually fortified, the army embarked on its invasion of Bulgaria in early August, penetrating the Great Fence with little difficulty and reaching the vicinity of Ankhialos, south of Mesembria, a bit after mid-month. While the land forces were thus occupied, the imperial fleet, under the command of its admiral, Romanos Lekapenos, who, unlike the other Byzantine leaders at the time, was an Armenian peasant who had worked his way up the ladder of command to the rank of *droungarios*, sailed for the Danube and a rendezvous with Bogas and the Pechenegs, who had arrived on the north bank of the river from the steppe country.

Exactly what transpired after Lekapenos and the fleet met up with Bogas and the Pechenegs remains unclear. The extant sources related only

that “a difference of opinion” erupted almost immediately between the two Byzantine leaders that resulted in the Pechenegs not crossing the river and participating in the campaign.<sup>65</sup> There is no way of knowing what those differing “opinions” were, although scholars have advanced various suppositions. A strong possibility exists that the story of Bogas and Lekapenos falling out, when the most crucial stage of the grand tactical plan was about to commence, may have been an attempt by the Byzantine sources to gloss over an embarrassing failure of imperial diplomacy.

It can be assumed that Simeon did not simply sit idle while the Byzantines mustered a large land force in Thrace and negotiated with most of his neighbors for the obvious purpose of launching a massive combined assault on his state. His own diplomacy may have stymied Byzantium’s efforts toward Magyar involvement, and an early warning probably permitted him to forestall any Serbian participation. Although initially outbid by Bogas for the eastern Pechenegs’ support, it is possible that he persisted in his efforts toward them and finally turned the tables on the Byzantines by offering those opportunistic warriors a new reward—Bulgaria’s trans-Danubian province of Wallachia to pillage or possess—in return for their not pushing south of the Danube. No matter the actual reasons, the Pechenegs did not cross the river but instead turned to plundering Wallachia (a region they soon thereafter occupied) before returning to their homes and undertaking no actions in conjunction with the Byzantine incursion in the south.<sup>66</sup>

With the threats to his right flank and rear neutralized, Simeon concentrated his army to face Phokas’s invading host in the vicinity of Ankhialos, which the Byzantines had recently captured. He marched his men over the eastern Balkan Mountains, by way of the Dyulino Pass, and took up a position in their southern foothills, midway between Ankhialos and Mesembria and overlooking the stretch of coastal road connecting the two port-cities. The Byzantines were encamped on the coastal plain a short distance northwest of Ankhialos, and their scouts soon informed Phokas that the Bulgarians had arrived in force. Word probably had yet to reach him that the Pechenegs were not crossing the Danube but, even if it had, that mattered little since his objective was to defeat the Bulgarians as decisively as possible. The main enemy force now lay gathered to his front and, confident that the Bulgarians could not withstand a massive blow dealt them by his veteran army, Phokas decided to attack.

On 20 August the domestic of the Schools deployed his units in battle formation outside their encampment and ordered them to advance

northward over the coastal plain in a concerted assault on the Bulgarians. Simeon, observing those actions from atop a hill on the edge of the plain, instructed his commanders to form battle lines and move to meet the attackers. In a matter of minutes the two forces became locked in combat on the flatlands south of the Aheloi (Gr: Akhelous, or Akheloos) River, a small stream flowing from the Balkan Mountains and emptying into the Black Sea somewhat closer to Mesembria than to Ankhialos. Details of the engagement following its initial eruption remain cloudy because the Byzantine sources provided two somewhat differing portrayals of the battle. John Skylitzes, writing nearly 200 years after the fact, uncharacteristically included both depictions in his text.<sup>67</sup>

One account, which the majority of historians favor, related that Phokas opened the battle with a successful assault on Simeon's lines, inflicting numerous casualties and forcing the Bulgarians back along the plain in an increasingly disorganized retreat, verging on a rout. The day's weather being hot, Phokas, who led his men from close to the front and confident that total victory was shortly within reach, stopped in the midst of the fighting and dismounted at a spring that he had stumbled on for a quick rinse and a drink. While he did so, his horse, spooked by some battle noise, bolted loose from its temporary tether and galloped along the rear of the nearby battle line. Some Byzantine troopers, familiar with the commander-in-chief's mount and seeing it running riderless, immediately concluded that Phokas had fallen and sent up the cry that he was killed. Like a wildfire, the false and demoralizing news spread along the Byzantine line. The army's advance sputtered to a halt as the men, their morale shaken, lost all enthusiasm for the fight, with some making off for the rear. Demoralization swiftly turned into panic. Simeon, observing the growing disruption in the enemy battle lines from his perch on high ground, quickly took advantage of the situation. He immediately ordered his warriors to stand and turn on their disorganized pursuers. The Byzantines broke and fled as the Bulgarians moved from retreat to the attack. A rout ensued, in which thousands of imperial troops were killed, wounded, or captured by their enemy or trampled underfoot by their own hysterical, fleeing comrades. A number of imperial commanders and notables lost their lives in the tumult, including John Grapson of the *Exkoubitoi* and Constantine Lips. Leo Phokas and some others saved themselves by making their way to Mesembria through the chaos reigning on the battlefield. Apparent Byzantine total victory had been transformed into catastrophic defeat.<sup>68</sup>

The alternative Byzantine portrayal of the battle bore more of an overt political overtone than the other. According to the grand tactical plan, after ferrying the Pechenegs across the Danube, Romanos Lekapenos was expected to sail to Mesembria in support of the land forces and their drive over the Balkan Mountains. Assuming that the fleet was on its way, Leo Phokas commenced his attack on Simeon's force south of the Aheloi River. Just as in the other battle tale, his initial assault was successful, breaking the Bulgarians' lines and forcing them to flee. In the midst of his pursuit of the routed enemy, Phokas received a report informing him that, instead of putting into port at Mesembria, Lekapenos had set off with his entire fleet for Constantinople in an attempt to overthrow the regency-government (the implication being that such was his "opinion" in the clash with Bogas). Struck dumbfound and angered by the news, since he also possessed desires on the imperial throne, Phokas immediately rushed back to camp seeking verification of the troubling dispatch. His precipitate action was misinterpreted by nearby Byzantine troops, who concluded that their commander-in-chief was abandoning the field. Word quickly spread through the ranks, panic erupted, and many began breaking for the rear. An observant Simeon, who at first thought that the demoralized enemy troops' retirement was a feint intended to lure him into a trap, went on to reverse the course of the engagement in a way similar to that portrayed in the other version of events.<sup>69</sup>

The two Byzantine depictions of the Aheloi battle display some interesting facets for the historian. Since the accounts obviously originated after the fact, both were colored by political developments that emerged in Byzantium as direct results of the imperial army's decisive defeat by Simeon. Each reflected the views of opposing political factions that coalesced behind Leo Phokas and Romanos Lekapenos during their internal struggle to displace Zoë's government in the years immediately following the battle, with each side blaming the other for the loss. Less obvious than the political overtones, but perhaps more revealing of the Byzantine mind-set regarding themselves and the Bulgarians, was the two accounts' shared determination to erase from the public record any hint that Byzantium's grand army at Aheloi was out-generated and outfought by the despised Bulgarians. Defeat in both accounts was attributed to misinterpretations of chance actions by the high commanders that led to the troops' general demoralization, panic, and rout rather than to the tactical skill and fighting quality of their opponents. According to

both narratives, in transforming certain victory into catastrophic defeat through misconception, the Byzantine army had, in effect, defeated itself.

Was such truly the case?

If the anecdotal details at the command level (which represented the primary focus of the depictions, given their political purposes) are discounted, both accounts provided a similar record of the battle: It opened with a successful Byzantine assault on the Bulgarians; the Bulgarian lines were pushed back and apparently broken; the Byzantines pursued their fleeing enemy, in the course of which they became disorganized; the retreating Bulgarians rallied and turned on their pursuers; a general Bulgarian counterattack broke the shaken Byzantine army, which collapsed; and, finally, the Bulgarians relentlessly pursued the fleeing Byzantine fugitives, inflicting great slaughter on them in the process. Such an outline raises the justifiable suspicion that the two accounts, by primarily emphasizing the unfortunate impact of the commanders' chance actions, sought to hide the fact that Simeon had successfully drawn the Byzantines at Aheloi into the classic tactical trap of the feigned retreat. What had initially appeared to the Byzantines as certain decisive victory in reality had been only a deadly illusion.

Based on the above outline provided by the two Byzantine accounts, a reasonable reconstruction of the battle can be made that relies on tactics rather than accidental events<sup>70</sup> (Fig. 5.2).

On 20 August the two opposing armies drew up in formal two-line battle formations facing one another a bit north of the Byzantine encampment above Ankhialos and astride the coastal plain separating the shore of the Black Sea, on the east, from the rolling Balkan Mountain foothills, to the west. Phokas formed his entire force on the plain for a concentrated frontal assault on the Bulgarian lines to his north. Simeon, who planned to draw his enemy into a trap by employing the tactical maneuver of the feigned retreat, deployed the majority of his troops on the open plain and advanced them to meet the Byzantine attack, but he retained a strong reserve force, the core of which consisted of his personal retinue, concealed in the foothills beyond his right flank. The front lines of the armies collided on the plain and vicious fighting erupted, in which the Byzantines, as Simeon expected, gained the upper hand through sheer weight of numbers. Some Bulgarian units actually may have broke from the pressure while most began retiring northward at a lively pace, in loosely organized fashion under the command control of

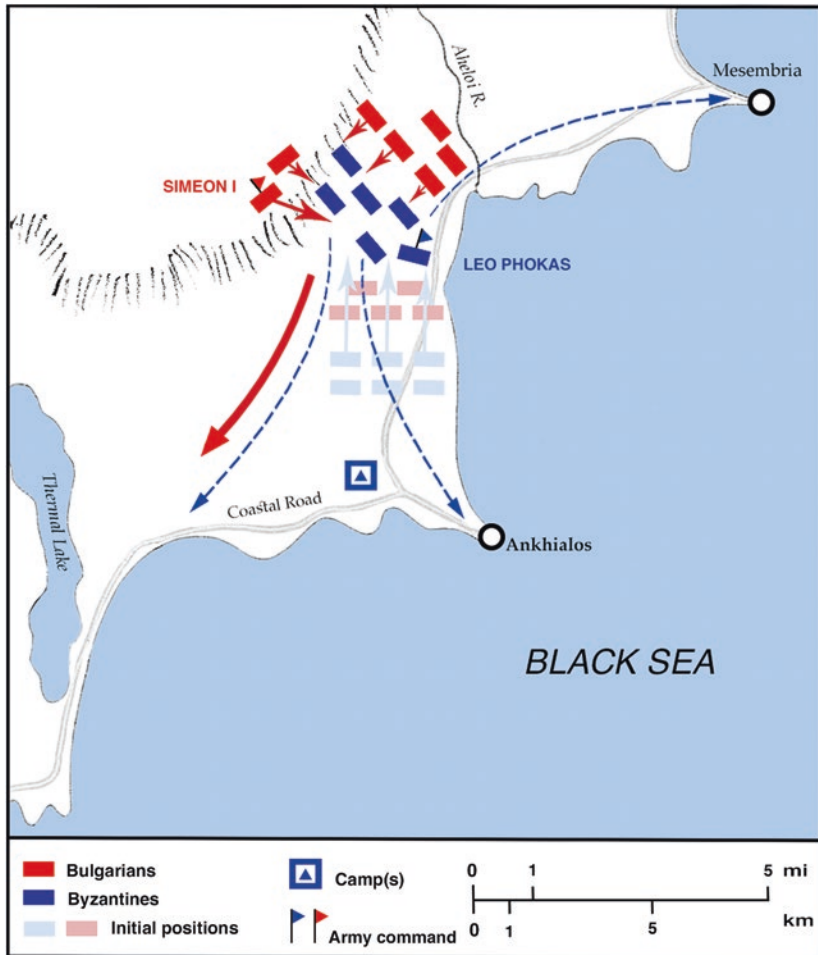


Fig. 5.2 Battle of Aheloi, 20 August 917

their officers, who operated in accordance with their ruler's plan. Seeing the Bulgarians apparently running from the field, the Byzantine troops took off after them and Phokas, thinking that Bulgarian resistance had collapsed, probably sent in his tagmatic reserves with the intention of delivering the *coup de grâce* to what he now considered a shattered foe.



As was often the case in such combat situations, the pursuing Byzantines' unit cohesion became increasingly disrupted and command control loosened as the retiring Bulgarians drew them ever farther northward toward the Aheloi River. Observing developments from his hilltop perch on the right flank, Simeon gauged the extent of Byzantine disorganization and northward penetration into the trap. When he deemed both sufficient, he signaled his commanders on the plain to turn their men about and strike their pursuers. At the same time, he personally led the reserve force out of concealment in the foothills and swept down on the exposed Byzantine left flank and rear. Some elements of the reserve may have struck southward to overrun the lightly defended Byzantine encampments. Apparently having committed his own reserves to the pursuit, Phokas possessed none to check the Bulgarians' flank assault. The unexpected and violent onslaught smashed into the Byzantines' disorganized lines. Whether Phokas was unhorsed in the fighting or seen to be fleeing the carnage that resulted, his actions were of small account amid the devastating psychological blow wreaked on the Byzantines by the sudden turn in the fighting. Fallen upon hard in front, flank, and rear by an enemy who had appeared beaten just a short time earlier, the Byzantine troops' morale collapsed, their units disintegrated, and, forced back against the Black Sea shoreline, they fled the battlefield in whatever direction that lay open to them—north to the safety of Mesembria's walls or south to the border beyond Ankhialos. The slaughter inflicted by the victorious Bulgarians throughout the rest of the day on the fugitives from the shattered imperial army was frightful, leaving heaps of dead bodies scattered over the plain, which, for some unknown but certainly un-Christian reason, were left by Simeon to rot unburied, their bleached bones still visible on the ground some 70 years later.<sup>71</sup>

Aheloi was Simeon's greatest military triumph. Conversely, it was Byzantium's most disastrous military defeat—surpassing Boulgarophygon—since Krum crushed Nikephoros I at Vürbitsa Pass a century earlier. The Bulgarian *tsar* displayed superior qualities as an inspiring commander and a master tactician, capable of instilling unwavering loyalty and dogged obedience in both his subordinate commanders and the rank-and-file troops. His army in the battle arguably was the finest military force fielded by the Bulgarians during the two-century course of the hegemonic wars. Its morale was high. Its chain of command, from Simeon down, functioned smoothly and effectively, exhibiting exceptional command control at all levels. If how they carried out

the critical maneuvers involved in successfully conducting a feigned retreat under heated battlefield conditions can be used as a barometer, the Bulgarian warriors were finely trained, highly motivated, and tightly disciplined fighters. The battle demonstrated that the Bulgarian army under Simeon's command not only was capable of standing up to the best Byzantine troops in a set-piece engagement, it was capable of trouncing them tactically and decisively in the process. Although that was a lesson that Byzantium's leadership should have learned from the Aheloi catastrophe, one additional military setback proved necessary before the imperial authorities began perceiving that essential fact.

The destruction of Byzantium's army at Aheloi left the Thracian and Macedonian themes helplessly undefended and provided Simeon with an open road to Constantinople. Instead of rushing his army headlong toward the city, however, he seems to have advanced at a steady but measured pace, permitting his men to pillage the countryside systematically along the way. His reasons for proceeding in such manner may have included inflicting as much material damage as possible on the Byzantines for instigating what he considered an unprovoked war. Perhaps just as likely, the extensive plundering of imperial lands probably was intended to serve as "bonus" pay for his troops' exemplary efforts in the recent battle.

Although the rate of advance rewarded Simeon's warriors, it also gave his shaken enemies time to regroup in some measure. Ships were sent to Mesembria to collect Leo Phokas and those troops who had reached that city's safety. Others were collected along stretches of the Black Sea coast. All were returned to Constantinople, where fugitives from the battle huddled behind its protective land walls, and began finding or reconstituting their broken units. The demoralized Aheloi survivors, joined by elements of the *Hetaireia* and some available Anatolian reinforcements, were quickly cobbled together into an army of sorts by the desperate regency-government for the protection of the imperial capital.<sup>72</sup> Leo Phokas, who continued to enjoy Zoë's favor despite Aheloi, was retained as overall commander. Ordered to stop the Bulgarian advance and now operating under the government's very eyes, Phokas marched his makeshift army out of the capital and encamped near Katasyrtai, a northern suburb of Constantinople, in preparation for moving against Simeon.

Phokas would not move farther. Simeon was in the vicinity and informed of the reconstituted Byzantine army's presence at Katasyrtai. He also learned that, for whatever reasons, the Byzantines' camp

security was lax. Simeon decided to strike before they realized their vulnerability and took corrective measures. A cavalry screen probably was thrown around the Byzantine encampment to mask the rapid concentration of his assault force from enemy patrols. Counting on the continued low morale of the Byzantine troops and the high combat quality and enthusiasm of his own, Simeon determined on a night attack to magnify the psychological terror of the blow he intended to inflict. Night fell (the date remains unknown but it probably was sometime in September), bringing with it a swarm of howling Bulgarian attackers. Phokas's encampment swiftly was infiltrated and thrown into chaos by the vicious melee that erupted. Surprised, confused, and frightened, those Byzantines who could, including Leo Phokas, fled for their lives to the nearby protection of the capital's land walls, causing consternation and fear among the city's inhabitants. A number of high-ranking officers, Nicholas Doukas, son of the dead usurper Constantine among them, were not as fortunate and perished in the fighting. Once again, Simeon and his warriors had crushed the main Byzantine military force facing them and driven its broken remains from the field of battle. While his men looted the rich cache of booty strewn about the wrecked Byzantine camps, Simeon was left to ponder his next move.<sup>73</sup>

Aheloï and Katasyrtai were two stunning, back-to-back Bulgarian tactical victories but Simeon faced a strategic dilemma that such successes could not overcome. Having completely quashed his opponents' military strength in Europe, he now controlled most of the central and northern Balkans. Territorially, Bulgaria was an empire and its ruler logically an emperor. As a devout Orthodox Christian monarch consciously governing within the parameters of the political culture created by Orthodox Byzantium, however, Simeon believed that only official recognition of his imperial status by the Byzantine emperor—God's earthly viceroy—could legitimize such standing beyond question. At the Hebdomon in 913 he received an imperial title from a weak and transitory regency acting in the name of an underage emperor. The future marriage of his daughter to young Constantine VII was intended to cement that recognition once the groom's minority ended and he took the throne in his own right. Zoë's coup changed the situation. She adamantly rejected both concessions, thus jeopardizing Simeon's imperial status within the Orthodox world. The frustrated Bulgarian ruler had spent four years attempting to force Zoë's government to abide by the Hebdomon settlement, but to little avail. His only hope of achieving his goal,

therefore, lay in imposing terms on an utterly defeated foe. Therein lay the rub.

No matter how crushing his battlefield triumphs or how deft his diplomatic efforts in stymying coalitions against him, Byzantium's regency-government could persist in refusing to abide by the terms of the 913 agreement by taking refuge behind the walls of Constantinople. Those land defenses virtually were impervious to the assault tactics and technologies available at the time, a fact with which Simeon was aware. Storming the Byzantine capital thus was out of the question but the alternative approach of laying siege to the city was not viable because Bulgaria possessed no navy to cut it off by sea and prevent its reinforcement and supply from Anatolia, Byzantium's core wellspring of human and material resources. For the same reason, he could not cross the Bosphoros or Dardanelles straits in the face of the patrolling Byzantine fleet to initiate offensives that could deprive the city of its Anatolian assets. There existed, however, one long-odds alternative and that was to encamp his men outside the city's walls, contact those in the capital who were sympathetic to his cause (although few, there were some), and trust that they would open a gate for his entry or instigate a coup against the infirm regency-government. Simeon probably determined that the chances of success for this last alternative were minimal so nothing came of it. He could only hope that his sympathizers in the city would pressure the regency-government to honor the concessions made to him at the Hebdomon four years earlier.<sup>74</sup>

Within days of Katasyrtai Simeon ordered his army to break camp and returned to Bulgaria. He could accomplish nothing further by remaining before Constantinople. Kept informed of the increasingly precarious position of Byzantium's regency-government, his military presence in the capital's vicinity could only hinder any chances that his sympathizers might have for turning the political unrest among the Byzantines in his favor, given the fear and animosity engendered among them by his recent victories. He found himself in the uncomfortable position of bidding time while events played out that were beyond his control. It was in his better interests to do so in Preslav rather than in enemy territory, where his troops lay at the mercy of continuously foraging for needed sustenance. Simeon returned to Bulgaria to await developments.

A wait-and-see posture ran counter to the Bulgarian ruler's temperament. By the time he reached his capital, Simeon had decided to mark time by addressing matters with Raškan Serbia and the treachery of its

prince and supposed ally, Petr Gojniković. After the death of Raška's first ruler, Vlastimir, the Serbian Byzantine client state suffered from a perennial succession struggle involving his sons and their progeny. In the 890s Petr, one of Vlastimir's grandsons, had secured the throne and won Simeon's protection. During his reign Christianity in its Slavic form spread among the Serbs from their Bulgarian neighbor and Simeon served as godfather for one of Petr's children.<sup>75</sup> The lure of Byzantine gold and the prospect of increased independent action offered by an alliance with the distant empire, as opposed to one with the strong state immediately across his border, drew Gojniković into Byzantium's anti-Bulgarian coalition. Although Petr's participation in the resulting campaign had been checked for whatever reasons, once the Byzantine military threat was defeated, Simeon concluded that the Raškan prince no longer could be trusted to help secure Bulgaria's western frontier.

One outgrowth of Raška's plague of succession problems was a small community of exiles from its extended princely family who found refuge with Simeon in Preslav. Among them was one of Petr's cousins, Pavle Branović, who had been living in the Bulgarian capital since the 890s. Pavle's pro-Bulgarian proclivities appeared to qualify him as a suitable candidate for replacing the untrustworthy Petr. A sizeable detachment of troops was assembled, placed under the command of Simeon's *kavhan*, Teodor Sigritsa, seconded by the *bolyar*, Marmais, and charged with invading Raška, removing Gojniković, and placing Pavle on the throne. The expedition, accompanied by Simeon's protégé, set out for Raška sometime in fall 917 and achieved success after little effective Serbian resistance. Petr was arrested and brought to Preslav, where he died a prisoner within a year. Pavle Branović (917–920) was installed as prince and vassal ally of Simeon. Raškan Serbia thus was transformed into a Bulgarian client state in the western Balkans as a direct consequence of Simeon's victories at Aheloi and Katasyrtai.<sup>76</sup>

Having secured his western border with Serbia, Simeon spent the winter of 917–918 monitoring political developments in Constantinople. Kept abreast of the evolving situation by his agents, he could not escape the fact that, on the whole, the news was not encouraging. Zoë's government maintained a tenuous grip on power despite growing divisions within its ranks and mounting popular discontent among the city's inhabitants, who blamed the military disasters suffered at the Bulgarians' hands and rising Arab raids in Anatolia and Italy on the fact that a woman held the reins of government. There was talk that Patriarch

Mystikos planned to displace Zoë and reinstall himself as head regent, which could prove advantageous for Simeon, but Mystikos was a cleric, not a commander, and his past record as head-of-state was perceived by most Byzantines as having been weak and ineffective. What backing Mystikos may have enjoyed was counterbalanced by the emergence of Leo Phokas and Romanos Lekapenos as budding military contenders for usurping power, and factions in support of both had appeared. Zoë continued her adamant opposition to recognizing Simeon's imperial title and would have nothing to do with the betrothal intended to unite the two states' ruling houses on an equal footing. Where the two military aspirants for the throne stood regarding those two crucial matters remained indiscernible, but it would have been foolish for Simeon to assume they were favorable.<sup>77</sup> With the arrival of campaigning season in spring 918, Simeon again decided to voice his case through military action.

The Bulgarian *tsar* gathered his forces in the Sofia Basin and led them southward down the Struma River valley in a strike against Byzantium's mainland Greek possessions. Although some scholars have branded the move a mistake, positing that another direct push on Constantinople could have led to the toppling of Zoë's floundering government and the desired terms granted him by its replacement, the strategic realities and political situation in the imperial capital, as Simeon certainly must have understood them, rendered such an outcome uncertain.<sup>78</sup> Simeon realized that, lacking a navy, he could not take his opponents' capital and impose his terms as outright victor. Until he could find an ally with a fleet, his only option was to ravage Byzantium's Balkan territories, causing such widespread havoc, death, and destruction that the magnitude of the losses ultimately would bend the Byzantine authorities to his will. He had thoroughly plundered the themes of Thrace and Macedonia in three of the previous five years, leaving them devastated. Doing so again offered little additional leverage. On the other hand, Byzantine lands in Greece lay virtually unscathed and were ripe for strategic pillaging, hence magnifying the pressure of lost assets on his opponents. Simeon apparently hoped that, at some point not long in the future, the Byzantine government would decide to cut its losses and bow to his wishes by officially implementing the terms of the Hebdomon agreement.

Thessaloniki's thematic force offered little trouble for the invading Bulgarians as they moved onto the Aegean coastal plain, bypassing the city, and turned down the coast road for Thessaly, in the Hellas theme.

Holed up within Thessaloniki's strong walls (and probably watched over by a Bulgarian detachment left to encourage their staying put), the Byzantine thematic troops posed no significant threat to Simeon's rear as he led his men into the unspoiled Greek mainland beyond. Other than destroying the city of Thebes and pushing as far south as Corinth, little detailed information exists regarding Simeon's 918 Greek campaign. Any resistance offered by the *themata* of Hellas and the Peloponnese remains unknown, but there is no doubt that the Bulgarians cut a swath of destruction through the heart of mainland Greece, from the environs of Thessaloniki to the Isthmus of Corinth, leaving towns and villages ruined, monasteries plundered, and numerous Byzantine inhabitants dead, refugees in the mountains, or carried off as captives. On reaching Corinth, Simeon was satisfied that he could do little more. He already had sent part of his army back to Bulgaria carrying large quantities of plunder and conducting hordes of prisoners, while his remaining troops were becoming overburdened with similar booty. He therefore turned his men northward and marched back to Bulgaria, rendering mainland Greece largely devastated and militarily weakened. In the years immediately following the campaign, bands of Bulgarian raiders prowled the ravaged Greek countryside with impunity.<sup>79</sup>

Simeon returned to Preslav hopeful that his actions had tipped the scales in his favor and spent the winter waiting to hear from his informants in Constantinople whether the government there would acquiesce in those matters of most concern. As a hedge against their not doing so, he apparently dispatched an embassy to the Tarsus Arabs, through the assistance of his Zahumljen Serb ally Višević (who possessed an Adriatic port and ships), to negotiate naval assistance for renewed military efforts in the coming year if necessary. Sometime in early April 919 Simeon learned that his hopes for a favorable turn of events within the Byzantine leadership were in vain. The *droungarios*, Romanos Lekapenos, with the support of Patriarch Mystikos, a faction within the regency-government, and most of the capital's populace, had occupied the Great Palace at the end of March as the protector of 13-year-old Constantine VII against a threatened coup attempt by Leo Phokas. In early May Lekapenos married his daughter Helena to the young and now dependent emperor and assumed the official title of *basileopater*. That development quickly led to the revolt, capture, and execution of Phokas, the removal of Zoë as head regent (technically replaced by Mystikos), and the emergence of Lekapenos as Byzantium's veritable head-of-state.<sup>80</sup>

The news that an upstart Armenian admiral had stolen from him the marriage alliance with Constantine VII that he considered so critical in cementing his own recognition as a legitimate Orthodox emperor enraged Simeon. He ordered a muster of his troops for another expedition into Byzantine Thrace to either ratchet up the pressure on the new regency to grant his political wishes or capture the Byzantine capital with the aid of the Tarsus Arabs' fleet and impose his terms. Avoiding the lands lying along the direct route from Bulgaria, through Thrace, to Constantinople, which were desolated by past plundering, Simeon led his army beyond Adrianople and laid waste those regions of the Macedonian theme that had escaped the full brunt of his previous efforts. Resistance was minimal since Lekapenos, who possessed a deft military and political mind, had no intention of risking open battle with the Bulgarians while his European forces remained decimated from previous encounters with Simeon and their loyalty to the new governing regime was untested, and therefore uncertain. The thematic troops mostly kept to their regional fortresses and Lekapenos held the *tagmata* in the capital. The Bulgarians advanced to the Dardanelles, where Simeon expected to find an Arab fleet waiting to assist in an operation against Constantinople, but Byzantine naval vigilance had prevented its arrival. With no ships to support such a strike, the Bulgarians could advance no farther and went into camp on the shores of the Dardanelles while Simeon contemplated his next move.<sup>81</sup>

Instead of contacting Simeon for negotiations, as the Bulgarian ruler must have hoped, Lekapenos turned to diplomacy for neutralizing this latest threat. Preslav was not the only Balkan capital to house a Raškan Serb, political expatriate community. Reflecting that state's long association with Byzantium, a number of Vlastimir's princely descendants resided in Constantinople, among whom was Zaharije Pribislavljević, a cousin of Raška's Prince Pavle and an individual highly pro-Byzantine in his proclivities. Just as Simeon had chosen Pavle to replace an undesirable Serbian prince, Lekapenos now picked Zaharije to serve in a similar capacity, to the Bulgarian ruler's disadvantage. A small force was gathered in Dyrakhion to support Pribislavljević in the coup effort and dispatched to Raška.

Word of the attempt reached Simeon, who, realizing that he could accomplish little more by remaining in Byzantine territory, broke camp on the Dardanelles and retreated to Bulgaria. He sent a detachment of men to help bolster Pavle in facing the unfolding situation. Details of



the confrontation between Pavle and Zaharije are lacking, other than Zaharije was defeated and captured. The unsuccessful Byzantine candidate was handed over to the Bulgarians by Pavle and transported to Preslav, where Simeon kept him under loose house arrest and treated him with respect in an effort to win his loyalty for the future.<sup>82</sup>

Although Simeon's Serbian client proved his worth in defeating the Byzantine effort to destabilize Bulgaria's western border, that affair, in conjunction with Lekapenos's refusal to accept open combat or to negotiate, ended any chance for a settlement in 919 of those issues considered imperative by Simeon. For his part, Lekapenos learned the value of declining battle with the Bulgarians and the potential strategic role that Raškan Serbia could play in hobbling Simeon's efforts against Byzantium. Even though the year's military events appeared inconsequential for Bulgaria, signs were emerging that stalemate, rather than success, might be the most likely result of Simeon's anti-Byzantine military operations.

The weak and unsteady leadership that characterized Byzantium's government since the death of Leo VI in 912 ended with the events of 920 in Constantinople. Having previously made himself *basileopater* and the most powerful member in his son-in-law's regency, Lekapenos took the final steps leading to his imperial elevation by the year's close. In late September he had a cowed Constantine VII raise him to *kaisar*, the second highest position in the state, and by mid-December his son-in-law was induced to proclaim him co-emperor. Patriarch Mystikos crowned him Emperor Romanos I Lekapenos (920–944) on 17 December.<sup>83</sup> To help ensure that his acquisition of the throne was unencumbered by military complications from Bulgaria, during the year Lekapenos orchestrated a successful distraction in Raška preventing Simeon from launching a new annual assault on Byzantine territory.

Although the Raškan coup attempt by Zaharije Pribislavljević that he staged in the previous year failed, Lekapenos had not forsaken efforts to stir up troubles for Simeon on his western border. Undaunted by the earlier setback, Romanos turned to the more traditional approach of bribery. Through his agents in Dyrrakhion, he spent much of winter 919–920 enticing Knez Pavle to renounce his Bulgarian allegiance by funneling to him large donatives of gold and promises of expanded independence of action. By spring 920 Pavle succumbed to Lekapenos's offers and commenced publicly displaying his new friendly ties with Byzantium, causing Simeon to grow perturbed with his client. After

minor border clashes between his troops and those of Pavle erupted, Simeon decided to intervene again in Raškan internal affairs by replacing its turncoat prince with an individual more trustworthy as an ally. Surprisingly, and perhaps foolishly, he turned to the captive Zaharije for playing the role of new Raškan vassal prince. Convinced that the lenient and deferential treatment during his incarceration in Preslav had indoctrinated Zaharije into a loyal and dependable client, Simeon mustered his forces for placing him on the Raškan throne.

Details of Simeon's campaign to depose Pavle are lacking. Hostilities probably broke out in late spring and continued throughout most of the remaining campaigning season. Raškan opposition seemingly was far more determined than in 917, when a similar operation had elevated Branović to power with little resistance. Perhaps the rugged Dinaric terrain, combined with Pavle's successful consolidation of his authority among the various Serbian *župani* through liberal distribution of increased largess (thanks to the Byzantine bribes), resulted in rendering the Bulgarian incursion militarily difficult, more akin to the experiences of Presiyan and Boris when they invaded the region than to that of Sigrítsa and Marmaís three years earlier. By the time the Bulgarians succeeded in overthrowing Pavle and imposing Zaharije as new Raškan ruler (920–924), it probably was sometime in mid to late fall and Simeon's army was spent for the year. While the Bulgarians' attention was focused to the west, Lekapenos acquired the rank of caesar and took advantage of the winter military lull to gain Byzantium's imperial throne.<sup>84</sup>

In the first half of 921 Romanos cemented his imperial hold on Byzantium by crowning his wife Theodora empress and having Constantine VII elevate his eldest son Christopher to co-emperor, rendering the matter of imperial precedence between the Macedonian and Lekapenoi houses somewhat ambiguous. Despite the fact that Constantine, now aged 16 and approaching his majority, technically remained the legitimate senior ruler, Romanos unquestionably exerted dominant authority among the three imperial figures heading the government.<sup>85</sup>

Simeon was forced to modify the political aims of his subsequent anti-Byzantine military actions to address Byzantium's new leadership situation, while steadfastly retaining his ultimate objective—the official recognition of his own imperial standing. He thereafter would attempt to force the deposition of Romanos and his son through all of the military and diplomatic means at his disposal. By early 921 Simeon stood ready to launch renewed military efforts against the empire.

Having attained Byzantium's imperial throne, Romanos also was determined to conduct military operations against his empire's troublesome northern neighbor as part of efforts to validate his usurpation and consolidation of young Constantine's prerogatives. He ordered the Balkan thematic commanders to bring their forces to full strength and initiated intensified recruitment to fill the ranks of the *tagmata* and *Hetaireia*. Simeon was kept fully informed of those preparations through his sympathizers in the Byzantine capital and his on-going correspondence with Patriarch Mystikos, who, in attempting to convince him to cease hostile actions against the empire, furnished information about Romanos's military buildup in hopes of intimidating him into agreeing to a peace arrangement.<sup>86</sup> With his western borders again seemingly secure, and confident in the capabilities of his troops, Simeon responded to Mystikos by brushing aside offers of tribute and land grants and demanding that Romanos be deposed.<sup>87</sup> At the same time, he marshaled his forces for a new incursion into Byzantine Thrace to prod the Byzantines into acting as he desired.

Exactly what Romanos intended regarding military operations against the Bulgarians in 921 remains unknown because Simeon struck early and first. In the opening week of March he led his men into Byzantine territory. They swept through the Macedonian and Thracian themes, forcing the defending thematic troops to hole up in their regional fortresses, and made for Constantinople, where Simeon hoped that their presence immediately outside the city would pose such a threat to the proprietary interests of Byzantium's patrician elite that they would bend to his wishes and overthrow Romanos to spare themselves significant material losses. The Bulgarians again occupied Katasyrtai and began plundering the Thracian environs of the Byzantine capital. Caught off guard by Simeon's early assault, Romanos ordered his domestic of the Schools, Pothos Argyros, to conduct a reconnaissance of Bulgarian movements north of the city. Pothos marched out with elements of the *tagmata* and took up a position at Thermopolis, a Thracian suburb of the capital near Katasyrtai, from which he dispatched a small force to reconnoiter the Bulgarians' activities. Poorly led, the detachment stumbled into an ambush and, after some intense fighting, was virtually annihilated, leading Pothos and his remaining troops to retreat into the city.<sup>88</sup>

Just as had Krum a century earlier, after the action at Thermopolis Simeon threatened the rich villas and palaces of the Byzantine elite strung along the northern shore of the Golden Horn. Memories of

Krum's depredations still rankled among many of Constantinople's leading families, so when Bulgarian troops began systematically wreaking havoc on estates located beyond the Horn in the vicinity across from Kosmidion, Romanos was forced to act in defense of the patricians' interests or risk potentially losing their continued support. Sometime during the week of 11 March the *tagmata* and *Hetaireia*, again commanded by Pothos, were ferried across the Golden Horn by the imperial fleet and mustered in battle formation on the small plain outside of Pegai (m: Kasimpaşa), a northern suburb of the capital, to meet and stop the advancing Bulgarians.<sup>89</sup> Serving as unit commanders in the force were such notables as Leo Moroleon (who had earned the nickname of "the Fool" because of his recklessness in combat, and whose son Michael had been mortally wounded at Thermopolis), John the Rector, and the patrician Photeinos. Alexios Mosele, admiral of the fleet, drew up his ships close to the Horn's north bank in support of the army's rear and personally led a unit of marines on land to act as a reserve.

It was not long before Simeon's troops, streaming down from the heights surrounding the plain, fell on Pothos's force with little warning. Shaken by the avalanche of the initial Bulgarian assault, many Byzantine troopers broke and fled for the ships at anchor off of the Horn's bank, carrying with them John the Rector, who barely managed to reach one of the galleys and safety. Those who had not broken at the battle's outset stood for a time desperately fighting to stave off the specter of defeat within sight of the capital's inhabitants. Many died in the process, including the patrician Photeinos. The pressure exerted on the Byzantines by the Bulgarian attackers soon grew too much to withstand and their lines gave way. Running for the ships in their rear, hundreds were cut down by their foes, others were drowned as they attempted to board the ships or were forced back against the shore and into the waters of the Horn, and still more were taken prisoner by the Bulgarians. In the frenzy of the rout, the *droungarios* Mosele and his deputy commander both slipped from a ship's gangway while trying to board and, weighted down by their body armor, drowned. Pothos and Moroleon, choosing not to make for the ships, fought their way through the chaotic melee to reach safety in the fortress of Kastellion (m: Galata). With no organized Byzantine forces left to oppose them, Simeon's triumphant troops pillaged the battlefield and then rampaged through the rich palaces and estates located along the shores of the Golden Horn and lower Bosphoros. In the words of the Byzantine sources, they "set fire to the entire straits."<sup>90</sup>

Once again, Simeon had decisively swept his enemies from the field and laid waste the environs of their capital only to find that his victories and depredations won him a mere stalemate. With his elite professional tagmatic units temporarily wrecked and his thematic militia hunkered down in their provincial fortresses, Romanos had no option but to remain within the fortifications of his impregnable capital and let Simeon, who lacked a navy to force a decisive action for the city, exhaust his strength ravaging the countryside. He soon adopted that stance as policy. Such a military approach was a costly Periklesian strategy, both demographically and economically, but, so long as the price reasonably could be borne by Byzantium's patricians and common subjects without breaking their support for his regime, it stood a chance of wearing the Bulgarians down to a point at which Simeon ultimately might accept a negotiated peace.<sup>91</sup> To that end, Romanos had Patriarch Mystikos persist in his diplomatic correspondence with Simeon, who, after the welter of plundering following Pegai, had withdrawn his forces westward to the vicinity of Herakleia and recommenced pillaging the Macedonian and Thracian themes with impunity, activities that occupied the rest of the year's campaigning season. The lone concrete result of Mystikos's diplomatic efforts in 921 was the conclusion of a prisoner exchange sometime during the summer, and that was an initiative first broached by the Bulgarian ruler.<sup>92</sup>

Romanos's usurpation of the imperial throne and his adoption of a passive defensive strategy against the Bulgarians did not sit well with all Byzantine subjects. By the time Simeon began his incursion leading to Thermopolis and Pegai, the imperial Italian themes of Calabria and Longobardia had risen in revolt. In the empire's Peloponnesian theme, inspired by the persistent presence of Bulgarian raiding parties on the Greek mainland, the Milingi and Ezertsi, Slavic tribes inhabiting the mountainous southern regions of the peninsula who had successfully resisted Byzantium's Hellenization efforts, also rebelled in reaction against an increase in tribute demanded by the thematic authorities to defray the costs of suppressing the uprisings in Italy. On receiving news of the Slavic revolt in the Peloponnese, Simeon, facing no enemy in the field and essentially marking time in enemy territory, dispatched some troops from Thrace to mainland Greece in support of the rebels. On arriving, they occupied the attention of the Hellas thematic units, preventing them from reinforcing their counterparts in the Peloponnese who were struggling to suppress the two rebellious Slavic tribes. It

required nine months (March through November) of difficult effort before the Byzantines finally brought the Milingi and Ezertsi to heel.<sup>93</sup>

By the end of the Slavic revolt in Greece, Simeon had returned to Bulgaria with his main army. The year 921 ended for him with a cache of plunder from the Byzantine elite's estates near Constantinople, which he used to pay his troops and augment his treasury, as well as a minor expansion of his state's permanent presence in mainland Greece. Despite such gains, Simeon's strategic situation had changed little. In fact, it may have worsened. Following the Pegai battle, Byzantine forces in Constantinople and in the Thracian and Macedonian themes confined themselves to their fortifications and refused combat in the open. The same held true for the *themata* in Greece. Continued ravaging of the increasingly devastated and unprotected countryside in those regions only augured diminishing strategic returns, in terms of treasure for himself and his men and economic pressure on Byzantium's governing elite. A decisively victorious action against his enemy's capital alone continued to offer the only alternative for achieving the results he desired, but for that he required naval support, which proved difficult to procure. One past arrangement with the Tarsus Arabs had misfired and forging a new one was a process moving at a snail's pace, probably because Simeon had little to offer beyond promises of a share in the loot if the joint efforts were successful. Until an ally with a navy was secured, Simeon needed to maintain military pressure on Byzantium.

In response to his strategic situation at the end of 921, Simeon again modified his military strategy for the next year's campaigning season. If the Byzantines were determined to remain on the defensive behind their fortifications, then he would attempt to deprive them of as many fortresses as possible in Thrace and Greece. Doing so would weaken them militarily and economically by decreasing their available defensive positions and permitting him to incorporate the territories immediately surrounding the captured strongholds directly into the Bulgarian state, thereby insuring that the fruits of the inhabitants' production and military potential benefitted his coffers and army and not those of his enemy. For good measure, he also would continue to threaten the rich estates of the empire's patricians near Constantinople, thus maintaining pressure on those in the capital who potentially could force a favorable change in governmental policy.

When Simeon renewed his now annual incursions into Byzantine territory in 922, he did so by concentrating on three fronts. First, after

isolating the Macedonian and Thracian thematic garrisons in their fortified primary administrative centers at Adrianople and Arkadiopolis, Simeon's main force set about reducing and capturing as many secondary strongholds scattered throughout those themes as possible. By the end of summer a number of Byzantine fortress-towns in Thrace, including Bizya, were in Simeon's hands, giving him direct control over significant portions of former thematic land and depriving Byzantium of their inhabitants and resources.<sup>94</sup>

In the midst of those efforts—and once he was certain he faced no major Byzantine counteroffensive—Simeon sent a detachment of troops to conduct a separate, secondary operation in the vicinity of Constantinople. Its mission was to instigate consternation among Byzantium's patricians by continuing the devastation of their landed estates in the capital's environs begun the previous year. In early summer the Bulgarian raiders penetrated to the far end of the upper Golden Horn, where they burned, among other structures, the palace of Romanos's wife Theodora, located near a church dedicated to Saint Theodora and close to a bridge across the local Barbizis River named in honor of Emperor Justinian I.<sup>95</sup>

Distraught over the renewed Bulgarian depredations inflicted on the nearby properties of his own and the city's leading families, Romanos harangued his tagmatic officers at a banquet given in the Great Palace, urging them to do something to relieve the threat. His impassioned plea inspired Saktikios, commander of the *Exkoubitoi*, to take action. In the very early hours of the following morning Saktikios led his men out of the city and made his way under cover of darkness to the region of the upper Horn, where the Bulgarians' camp was located. Discovering that most of the enemy raiders were off on plundering missions, the Byzantines fell on the lightly defended encampment. Initially surprised by the unexpected assault, the small force of camp guards rallied and put up a desperate fight but, despite stout and protracted resistance, they were progressively overwhelmed. Most of the defenders ultimately were killed but a few escaped, carrying word of the attack to the commanders of the raiding parties in the neighborhood. Those officers quickly reassembled their men and hurried back to the overrun encampment.

The *Exkoubitoi* were still struggling to eradicate the last pockets of resistance among the camp guards when the returning Bulgarians arrived and sprang into action against them. Tired from the exertions of protracted combat and facing superior numbers, Saktikios and his

men attempted to stand their ground but in short order were forced to retreat. Fleeing to a nearby river, the Byzantines turned and tried to fend off their pursuers, in the process of which Saktikios's horse became mired in the mud along the river's bank and he was gravely wounded in the buttocks and thigh. Saved from capture by his attendants, he remained in the saddle once his horse was freed and led his surviving troops in a well-organized fighting withdrawal to the Blakhernai Gate and safety within the capital's walls, a feat for which he won acclaim from the emperor, the army, and the city's inhabitants. Saktikios, however, did not live to enjoy any rewards for his heroic sortie beyond that of fleeting renown. He died of his wounds the night following the engagement.<sup>96</sup> As far as the Bulgarian raiding force was concerned, the action in which Saktikios gave his life was viewed as a minor setback and they thereafter continued their pillaging. Sometime before the end of summer, their mission adequately accomplished, they rejoined Simeon's main army in Thrace.

While Simeon operated in Thrace and near Constantinople, he also opened a third front against Byzantium's possessions in Greece. At the beginning of campaigning season he dispatched men to raise troops from the Macedonian and mainland Greek Slavs and to serve as the leadership and core shock units for the force they gathered. Simeon counted on the Slavs' near-perennial disaffection with Byzantine control to provide a large pool of armed volunteers eager to join a Bulgarian-led, anti-Byzantine military operation. His expectations were not disappointed. By late July the Bulgarians' recruitment efforts were successful, and in August a large Bulgarian-led Slavic army swept through mainland Greece and into the Peloponnese, pillaging and capturing numerous Byzantine strongholds. When the operations ended in early winter, much of the Hellas theme and a wide swath of the northern Peloponnese were securely in Bulgarian-Slav hands. Simeon's subsequent control over those Greek regions lasted for over three years, during which time Byzantium's remaining thematic troops in the skeleton themes of Hellas and Peloponnese were confined to a limited number of fortresses and largely eliminated as effective military forces.<sup>97</sup>

Romanos, remaining passively defensive in the face of Simeon's blows during 922, pursued an active anti-Bulgarian diplomatic agenda. Contact with the Bulgarian ruler was maintained through Mystikos, who persisted in corresponding with Simeon throughout the summer. Again hoping to intimidate him into seeking a peace agreement, in one letter the patriarch informed Simeon that Romanos was on the brink of finalizing



a grand, potentially crushing, anti-Bulgarian military alliance, consisting of the Kievan Rus', Pechenegs, Alans, and Magyars, but he also stated that Romanos was willing to negotiate with Simeon for ending hostilities before the alliance was implemented.<sup>98</sup> Whether such a coalition actually was on the verge of achievement in 922 can be questioned since warfare between Bulgaria and Byzantium persisted well into 924 and the anti-Bulgarian alliance never materialized in the field. There is little doubt, however, that Romanos made serious efforts in that regard.

Large, multi-membered military coalitions might prove difficult to arrange successfully, but Romanos had open a less daunting diplomatic option that had proved useful in the past. For the third time he looked to Raškan Serbia for diverting Simeon's attention away from Byzantium's ravaged territories. Although Prince Zaharije Pribislavljević served as a Bulgarian client, for most of his life prior to winning Simeon's favor, Zaharije's sympathies lay steadfastly with Byzantium and he once had been Romanos's protégé. Counting on a strong residual pro-Byzantine bent in Zaharije's personal proclivities and Raškan Serbia's core traditions, Romanos made every effort to entice the Serbian prince to abandon Simeon's service and cast his lot with Byzantium. By the close of 922 the emperor's inducements had convinced Zaharije of his error in embracing Bulgarian suzerainty. Just as Romanos hoped, the Raškan Serb ruler's timely defection to the Byzantine camp exerted a deleterious impact on Simeon's anti-Byzantine military efforts in 923.

Simeon began that year's campaign against Byzantium by falling on the Macedonian theme's administrative center at Adrianople, probably as the opening gambit in a plan to conquer all of Thrace to Constantinople's doorstep. Adrianople strategically lay astride the Diagonal highway, the primary line of communication in Thrace, and its capture would free his rear while he concentrated on Arkadiopolis and other regions still held by the Byzantines. After his initial assault was repelled, he laid siege to the city, completely investing it with strong earthworks to block all possibility of outside supply. Adrianople's commander, the Macedonian *strategos*, Leo the Fool (Moroleon), energetically countered all of Simeon's efforts to take the city, keeping the besiegers off balance by repeated, disruptive sorties and repulsing their attempts to storm its walls. Although the sources did not specify the actual length of the siege, they inferred it was protracted, thanks to Leo's successful defensive tactics. Only when the city's garrison and inhabitants were on the verge of starvation did Leo finally surrender Adrianople to Simeon, implying that the siege

lasted through much of the year's campaigning season and tied down the Bulgarians' main force, sparing Byzantium's remaining Thracian possessions from serious threat. That it had greatly disrupted Simeon's grand tactical plans for the campaign can be surmised from his uncharacteristic treatment of Moroleon following the surrender. Frustrated and angry, Simeon had the captive commander tortured and executed.<sup>99</sup>

Perhaps Simeon's ire was intensified by news that reached him while the siege was in progress. Word arrived that Raškan Prince Zaharije had defected to his enemy and was raising the Serbian tribes along his western borders in rebellion against him.<sup>100</sup> As soon as Adrianople fell, he "punished" Moroleon, installed a small garrison in the city, and quickly marched his army back to Bulgaria. A detachment of troops (its strength unknown) was placed under the joint command of Kavhan Sigritsa and the *bolyar* Marmaïs (who since 917 seem to have been responsible for Bulgarian military efforts in Raška) and sent to suppress Zaharije's uprising and stabilize the Serbian frontier. Although details of the campaign are lacking, the known result was a major Bulgarian military setback. Somewhere in the mountains of Raška the invading Bulgarians were brought to battle by Zaharije's troops and soundly defeated. Both Sigritsa and Marmaïs fell in the fighting, following which Zaharije had their dead bodies stripped and decapitated. He then sent their severed heads and armor to Emperor Romanos as trophies trumpeting his military victory over the Bulgarians and his loyalty to Byzantium.<sup>101</sup>

Coming late in the campaigning season as it did, Simeon was forced to accept defeat in Raška for the moment. His frustration with the sparse results of his blunted campaign in Thrace, combined with the humiliating loss to the Serbs, was compounded further when he learned that the garrison left to hold Adrianople, his only victory in 923, had fled the city without offering resistance to an approaching Byzantine relief force sent by Romanos.<sup>102</sup> Despite the year's cumulative disappointments, Simeon was not one to passively accept them as signs of unfortunate fate. He instead grew more determined to force a conclusive confrontation with the Byzantines that would bring his longstanding and unswerving political objective—official recognition of his imperial status by Byzantium's emperor—to fruition. That goal entailed securing a naval ally for a combined assault on the Byzantines' capital as swiftly as possible.

Over the winter of 923–924 Simeon intensified his diplomatic efforts to win the necessary naval assistance for the decisive action he sought. With the continued aid of his Zahumljen Serb ally Mihajlo Višević,

Simeon dispatched an embassy to North Africa and the Arab Fatimid *khalife*, Ubaydallah al-Mahdi (909–934), ruler of the first organized Shiite *khalifate* centered on modern Tunisia, instead of to the Abbasid-led Sunni Arabs in Syria or southeastern Anatolia, as he had done unsuccessfully in the past. Although the heyday of Fatimid power lay some four decades in the future, at the time Simeon's envoys arrived in his capital at Mahdia, Ubaydallah was a rising star in the Islamic world, exerting authority over the Arabs of Sicily and threatening the Sunni Abbasid *khalifate's* hold on Egypt. After lengthy negotiations, the Bulgarian ambassadors' arguments for a joint Bulgarian-Fatimid military effort against Constantinople won Ubaydallah's acceptance. He was seeking a way to herald his burgeoning status within the Islamic world and agreed to a treaty containing the Bulgarians' proffered terms. Simeon would supply the land force and Ubaydallah the naval, which were to converge on the city by late summer 924. Then they would jointly besiege and blockade Byzantium's capital, cutting it off from provisioning by both land and sea. Once Constantinople fell, the ensuing plunder would be divided equally between the two allies, which potentially implied that the Byzantine Empire might be partitioned between them.

Advanced word of the agreement probably was sent immediately to Simeon by his envoys, but the sweeping portent of the treaty prompted Ubaydallah to seek its formal ratification by the Bulgarian ruler. A Fatimid delegation was organized and, together with the Bulgarians, sailed out of Mahdia for Zahumlje, from where they would proceed overland to Bulgaria and receive Simeon's signature and seal on the pact. By necessity, their journey took them around the southern coast of Sicily and close to the heel of Italy. Off the Italian coast, however, misfortune struck. The ship was captured by a Byzantine naval patrol operating out of Calabria and its dignitary passengers sent to Constantinople, where they were brought before Emperor Romanos. Initially taken aback by the looming danger exposed in the uncovered alliance, the emperor reacted swiftly to nip it in the bud. He ordered the Bulgarian envoys immediately imprisoned but treated the Fatimid delegation with extreme deference and honor, loading them with gifts for the *khalife* and providing them with a ship for a return voyage to Tunisia. The magnanimous treatment of his representatives by Romanos moved Ubaydallah to renounce the Bulgarian alliance and to half the annual tribute for the year due him from Byzantium, which the empire paid for his keeping the Sicilian raiders somewhat in check (and at the time actually was in arrears).<sup>103</sup>

Confident in his prospects for the upcoming 924 campaign since word of the Fatimid alliance's collapse had yet to reach him, Simeon gathered the largest military force of his reign (its actual size, however, remains unknown). During summer 924 he led his host into Byzantine territory, again screening off the enemy thematic troops stationed in Adrianople and Arkadiopolis and systematically laying waste those Thracian lands not already in his hands. Romanos was prevented from concentrating reinforcements for his European *themata* because the Abbasid Arabs were conducting widespread raiding in Anatolia at the time and no troops from that region could be spared. By the end of August Simeon's army appeared before Constantinople. Only then did he learn that the Fatimid navy was not coming. Disappointed, he had no choice but to make the best of the situation. Simeon established camp at Kosmidion, began erecting earthworks for investing the city by land, and recommenced raiding the wealthy estates in the neighborhood of the capital, all of which were intended to exert as much psychological pressure as possible on Byzantium's patrician elite. His ploys ultimately succeeded.

Although the Byzantine sources on which our knowledge of events depends painted the picture of a stymied Bulgarian prince forced to seek peace with the empire on its terms when hopelessly faced with the impregnable defenses of the imperial capital, there is reason to conclude that such was far from the case. When Simeon appeared before Constantinople in 924 he controlled most of the Balkans and the military initiative in the war had lain in his hands for close to a decade. He had soundly defeated the Byzantines in every pitched battle fought since 917. Consistent costly defeats had reduced Byzantium's professional tagmatic troops' numbers, proficiency, and combat effectiveness while its European thematic militia had been rendered ineffective and, in some instances, largely nonexistent. The cumulative territorial, demographic, and fiscal losses suffered at Simeon's hands constituted significant blows to the Byzantines' economy, military strength, and international prestige—tax revenues sank and Balkan commerce was disrupted; European reinforcements for the Anatolian troops combatting the Arabs were unavailable; and consistent defeats made the empire appear weak to its Arab neighbors. Such ill effects of the war were exacerbated in the political realm by the blows inflicted on the personal wealth of the Byzantine elite, who grew increasingly disgruntled and whose support was crucial for Romanos's continued governance.<sup>104</sup> Instead of Simeon hopelessly bowing to the inevitable and suing for peace, as the Byzantine sources

would have readers believe, it was more probable that, in an act of bravado, the Bulgarian ruler sent word to the Great Palace expressing his willingness to discuss a cessation of hostilities *on his terms* and that Romanos, under pressure from his notables to end the protracted and costly warfare with the Bulgarians, embraced the opportunity offered by that opening.

Sometime during the first week of September the two sides exchanged hostages as mutual assurances of good conduct while undertaking direct talks. Romanos sent Patriarch Mystikos, accompanied by two senatorial patricians, to the Bulgarian camp to open negotiations. Although seemingly the obvious choice for the task, Mystikos received a cold reception from Simeon when they met for the first time since the fateful conclave at the Hebdomon in 913. Perhaps the bitterness instilled in Simeon by the Byzantines' protracted refusal to ratify officially his imperial gains from that meeting was stoked by again seeing Mystikos after so many conflict-filled years. Or possibly the low opinion of the patriarch that had formed in Simeon's mind over years of futile diplomatic correspondence resulted in his holding Mystikos in utter personal disdain.<sup>105</sup> No matter the reasons, when Mystikos arrived in the Bulgarian camp, Simeon gruffly refused to talk at any length with him, insisting instead that he arrange a face-to-face meeting with Romanos. On receiving the Bulgarian ruler's demand, Romanos, determined to end the conflict, immediately agreed to meet with Simeon on the south bank of the Golden Horn, at the foot of Kosmidion Hill.

Both parties were mindful of the meeting between Krum and Leo V that occurred in the same general location a century earlier. To forestall any plans for an ambush by either side, a new set of hostages was exchanged and Romanos had his engineers erect an elaborate jetty thrusting out into the Horn from its southern bank. The structure's perimeter was fortified and a raised platform, divided in half by a waist-high wall over which the monarchs would conduct their discussion, was built at its center. While the Byzantines labored on the jetty, Simeon ordered a limited number of plundering raids conducted on Constantinople's immediate environs, as a gesture conveying the message that he was not the ruler suing for peace at the upcoming meeting. One of the structures ravaged was the richly decorated Church of the Virgin in Pege (m: Balıklı), part of a sanctuary, located just outside the city's land walls and surrounding a spring held sacred by the Byzantines, that had been erected by Emperor Justinian I during the sixth century.<sup>106</sup>

On 9 September the meeting took place on its prepared stage, in full view of Bulgarian troops on the overlooking hill and members of the Byzantine senate lining the Blakhernai stretch of Constantinople's land walls.<sup>107</sup> Romanos arrived first by barge, accompanied by Mystikos and their respective entourages. Unable to resist using the occasion as a public forum for venting his spleen over suffering a decade of imperial frustration at Byzantine hands, Simeon appeared at the jetty on horseback, astride the very steed he had ridden at Aheloi, which bore visible scars from that battle (an insulting, symbolic reference to Byzantium's unprovoked attack on him in 917, which had sparked the uninterrupted warfare leading to the meeting). Surrounding him were units of his military retinue, decked in glittering ceremonial armor, who loudly and insultingly proclaimed him "emperor" in Greek for the benefit of the Byzantine audience on the jetty and walls. After ostentatiously ordering men to inspect the jetty and its immediate surroundings for possible ambushers (another pointed insult to the Byzantines), Simeon dismounted, walked onto the jetty, and strode to the partitioned platform at its center. The two monarchs then embraced each other across the dividing wall and commenced discussions. At their conclusion, Romanos bestowed on Simeon a number of gifts, publicly demonstrating that an agreement had been reached, after which the Bulgarian ruler and his retinue returned to their encampment and the Byzantine emperor, the patriarch, and their entourages sailed back to the city. Simeon broke camp soon after the meeting ended and returned to Bulgaria.

What actually was negotiated by Simeon and Romanos on the jetty remains unclear because only Byzantine sources written after the fact are extant and they were embroidered by legend and colored by a conscious effort to spin the record of the event in a favorable manner for themselves and posterity.<sup>108</sup> Because nothing was transcribed and signed at the meeting (or, if it were, has not survived), it can be deduced from subsequent events, combined with facts provided in the Byzantine accounts, that the two rulers agreed to a truce ending overt hostilities, the terms of which included Romanos officially recognizing Simeon's imperial standing on a par equal to his own, the reinstatement of tribute paid by Byzantium to Bulgaria, and Simeon returning to Byzantium the lands and towns conquered by him during his previous campaigns in Thrace and Greece.<sup>109</sup>

That the jetty meeting of September 924 resulted only in a truce rather than a formal peace might be attributed primarily to the thorny

central issue in the negotiations. Simeon achieved the goal for which he had tenaciously fought—a reigning Byzantine emperor officially bestowed recognition of his equal imperial standing. His success, however, came with a caveat. Although Romanos recognized Simeon as equal in status, he was a usurper. Constantine VII, who Simeon considered the legitimate senior emperor by right of birth, was conspicuously missing at the jetty meeting. Constantine's absence, which precluded his public personal concurrence with the meeting's results, no doubt raised questions about the ultimate legitimacy of Simeon's hard won imperial standing. Did Romanos's recognition settle the matter definitively or was it merely a repetition of the Hebdomon agreement in a different guise, with Romanos playing the role of *Mystikos*? Was Simeon's Bulgarian imperial status equal to that of a Byzantine *porphyrogenetos* or simply to that of a Byzantine usurper?

Answers to such questions were not readily discernable at the meeting. Since both rulers were anxious to halt the fighting at the time that they met, a mutual agreement was reached. For Romanos, granting Simeon imperial recognition, which he considered a formality entailing little or no actual cost, and annual tribute, which was a common practice in Byzantium's dealings with foreign powers and not viewed as onerous, were small prices to pay to halt the protracted open hostilities with Bulgaria. For Simeon, agreeing to a truce rather than a peace gave him time and latitude for exploring the answers to his questions, using the potential threat of force and the pace of fulfilling his obligation to return captured lands and fortresses as prods to test the Byzantines' true position on those sensitive matters of imperial concern.

During the remaining years of his reign, Simeon never again staged a major campaign into Byzantine territory, but he seems to have maintained a low level form of military pressure on Byzantium to remind its rulers of their obligations under the truce's terms. He permitted his warriors to conduct persistent, small-scale, local raids and border skirmishes with Byzantine troops in Thrace, and he dragged his feet over transferring to Byzantium the Thracian lands and fortresses captured by him during the previous decade (but his acquisitions in Peloponnesian Greece were returned soon after the truce was implemented). In addition, he undertook some domestic, symbolically significant, political initiatives designed to irritate and insult the Byzantines, probably as petulant payback for the years of perceived political humiliation that he suffered at their hands. Sometime after 924 Simeon unilaterally elevated

the autocephalous Orthodox archbishop seated in Preslav to the rank of Bulgarian patriarch, thus theoretically bestowing on its holder an ecclesiastical standing equal to his counterpart in Constantinople, and creating the level of state–church partnership necessary for displaying authentic imperial status according to the Byzantine model. He also began issuing official seals proclaiming himself Bulgarian emperor and “Emperor of the Romans” as well. While it is unlikely that Simeon was laying actual claim to the Byzantine throne by doing so, but rather making a public statement of his rule over former Byzantine territories and their resident populations, there can be little doubt that his use of the “Roman” title was spitefully intended to rub a sore spot among his former adversaries, and in that he succeeded.<sup>110</sup>

Once Simeon returned to Preslav after having wrung official Byzantine recognition of his imperial title, he immediately turned his attention to settling unfinished matters with his rebel client Zaharije in Raška. Plenty of time remained in the year’s campaigning season so he carefully prepared a crushing blow. A large force was mustered and placed under the command of three high-ranking *bolyari*, Knin, Imnik, and Itsvoklii.<sup>111</sup> Simeon again turned to the Serbian émigré community in Preslav and chose from among its ranks Časlav Klonimirović, son of an unsuccessful former claimant to the Raškan throne and his Bulgarian wife, to accompany the invading army. Although Časlav was sent ostensibly to serve as Simeon’s third Raškan princely replacement, this time the Bulgarian *tsar*, without the half-Serb’s knowledge, had decided to prevent any possibility of future Serbian client treachery by conquering the state outright.

Sometime in late summer or early fall 924 Bulgarian troops swarmed into Raška and began overrunning and devastating its territory. Faced with overwhelming force, Zaharije appealed to Romanos for assistance only to discover that the Byzantine emperor was committed to upholding the recently enacted truce with Bulgaria and would provide no succor by way of direct aid or diversionary operations. Left to stem the Bulgarian avalanche alone, Zaharije realized the task was futile so, seeking to avoid a personally humiliating public deposition and possible execution, he fled to neighboring Croatia, whose ruler Tomislav (*ca.* 910–928) afforded him asylum. Leaderless, Raškan Serbian resistance evaporated. The Bulgarian commanders issued a general summons for the local *župani* to lay down their arms and attend a gathering to swear collective allegiance to Časlav as their new sovereign. Once all the leaders were



assembled, instead of participating in a ceremony heralding a new prince, they and their supposed ruler were surrounded by Bulgarian troops and arrested. The Bulgarians then fanned out across the countryside looting and killing, sweeping up as many surviving inhabitants as possible and herding them, along with their captive chieftains and figurehead prince, to Bulgaria, leaving in their wake a mostly deserted wasteland. For seven subsequent years Raškan Serbia ceased to exist. The empty territories of the former state now formed the extreme western frontier of Simeon's empire, abutting Višević's allied Zahumlje and Duklja, to the south, and Tomislav's potentially dangerous Croatia, to the north.<sup>112</sup>

Tomislav often is historically portrayed as the greatest ruler of medieval Croatia. Sometime around 910 he gained the throne of Dalmatian Croatia, consolidated an effective army and navy, and incorporated Pannonian Croatia under his rule, establishing the first united Croat state. There was no permanent capital but Tomislav's chief residence was Biograd, a city on the Dalmatian coast. Both Simeon and Romanos recognized united Croatia as a force to be reckoned with in the Balkans' northwest. The Croat ruler's stock in Balkan international affairs rose higher in 925 when he appears to have attained the rank of king, but whether he was formally crowned by the Catholic pope, or by Romanos, or simply assumed the title on his own initiative remains unclear.<sup>113</sup>

Emperor Romanos gave priority to maintaining good relations with Tomislav since he could spare little manpower from the forces opposing Simeon to protect the Byzantine cities strung along the Adriatic coast north of Dyrrakhion in the event that the Bulgarians sought to expand in their direction. Although the common contention that Romanos brevetted Tomislav as a "*strategos*" for Byzantine Dalmatia can be questioned, he made every effort to win the powerful Croat ruler's loyalty.<sup>114</sup> By 925 an alliance was in place between Byzantium and Tomislav. Just as Simeon used the implementation of his truce obligations to pressure the Byzantines to abide by their concessions to him, the concord between Byzantium and Croatia threatened Bulgaria with a possible two-front war should Simeon break the truce. That situation was far from the Bulgarian *tsar's* liking. He had just successfully secured his western border by eliminating the persistent nuisance of Byzantium's Raškan Serb allies only to be faced with a new potential threat to his northwestern frontier posed by a more powerful Byzantine ally, over which he possessed no leverage or influence. Simeon came to view the latent danger to his state as intolerable and decided on preemptive action.

In May 926 a significant Bulgarian military force, commanded by one Alogobotur, invaded Tomislav's Croatia.<sup>115</sup> Advancing into Croatian territory, probably by way of the Sava River valley, the Bulgarians pushed into the rugged Dinaric regions, where Tomislav and his veteran levies trapped them in a mountain defile and brought them to battle. The ensuing combat was ferocious. In the end, their general lack of familiarity with the ground, the overextended length of their lines of communication, and the extreme ruggedness of the terrain conspired to place the Bulgarians at a decisive disadvantage. They suffered utter defeat and extremely heavy losses, with a casualty rate so high that their army was considered destroyed by later commentators. Fortunately for Simeon, Tomislav did not push his advantage following the battle and forewent expanding his territories at Bulgaria's expense by not advancing into the vacuum of deserted and undefended Raška.<sup>116</sup>

The Bulgarian debacle in Croatia was Simeon's first major military defeat since the Magyar invasion of 895, but far more decisive. Tomislav's unified, veteran Croats bore no similarities to the divided, pawn-like Raškan Serbs and could not be treated in similar fashion. The size of the army crushed in Croatia probably equaled those formerly used against the Serbs—a large detachment but not the bulk of Simeon's main force (as some scholars have speculated in the past). To defeat Tomislav and bend him to his will, Simeon now realized that he needed to concentrate most of his troops for the effort, but that meant placing them at risk to the same factors that led to the recent disaster. Should the results of a more major campaign be similar, he would be denuded of the strength to fend off any renewed Byzantine military effort, and the Byzantines certainly would leap at the chance to profit from Bulgarian misfortune. Concluding a peace with Tomislav, however, would preserve Bulgaria's primary military might for treating future possible circumstances.

Luckily for Simeon, he was granted the opportunity to achieve peace with Tomislav. Present in Preslav at the time (late 926/early 927) were papal legates, Bishop Madalbert and a certain John, who had been sent by Pope John X (914–928) to announce official papal recognition of Simeon's imperial title and to offer their services as mediators for negotiating a peace with the Catholic Croat ruler.<sup>117</sup> The Bulgarian *tsar* accepted their mediation offer and they left for Dalmatia and discussions with the Croatian king. For his part, Tomislav was heavily embroiled in internal problems plaguing Christian ecclesiastical affairs in

Croatia, which involved matters of episcopal jurisdiction and the liturgical use of Glagolitic in Croatia's churches.<sup>118</sup> Such pressing domestic issues probably account for his foregoing further military operations following trouncing the Bulgarian invaders. A 925 church synod held in the Dalmatian city of Split had failed to resolve the contentious matters and Tomislav was in the midst of preparing a second church meeting when Madalbert and John arrived and raised the issue of peace with Simeon. Because both rulers were anxious to settle matters, a treaty was quickly ironed out and ratified (probably in early 927). Although the terms of the agreement are unknown, fighting ceased between Bulgaria and Croatia, Zaharije did not return to Raška, and pre-926 state borders remained in place, all of which probably reflected the treaty's content. The peace established between the two states lasted for the remainder of the tenth century.

Following the end of war with Croatia, Simeon was free of pressing imperial and state concerns for the first time in 14 years. His imperial standing enjoyed international recognition and the two other contemporary Balkan powers, Byzantium and Croatia, posed no overt threats. Emperor Romanos had demonstrated that, despite his complaints over Simeon's pointed barbs regarding titles, patriarchates, and territorial transfers, he was committed to maintaining the truce with Bulgaria, while King Tomislav displayed no interest in breaking the newly negotiated treaty. Ironically, Simeon would have little time to savor his hard-won imperial gains. When warfare ended with Croatia he was in his early 60s. Over a decade of continuous physical and mental exertions on his part had taken their toll.

On 27 May 927 Simeon died of a heart attack.<sup>119</sup> No evidence exists supporting the frequently voiced romantic contention that Simeon was actively planning or leading a new military campaign against Byzantium at the moment of his demise, although such a denouement certainly would have befitted the story of the Bulgarian *tsar's* military efforts. The legacy of those efforts was a Bulgarian state ruled by an Orthodox Christian emperor in partnership with an official, native Orthodox patriarchal church organization. Both were cloaked in the outward trappings of Byzantine ceremonial. The Byzantine forms couched in native Slavic cultural dress that emerged in Simeon's Bulgaria became the model for all future non-Byzantine states that rose within the cultural orbit of Byzantium—in particular, Serbia and Russia. Some historians refer to the rise of a “Byzantine Commonwealth” in describing the phenomenon,

and Simeon's Bulgaria set the precedents for its future member-states. This legacy was cemented when, within five months of his death, Simeon's young son and successor Petŭr I (927–969) forged a conclusive peace with Byzantium that held for four subsequent decades.

## NOTES

1. For the reign of Simeon, see: Iv. Bozhilov, *Tsar Simeon Veliki (893–927). Zlatniyat vek na srednovekovna Bŭlgariya* (Sofia, 1983); P. Pavlov, *Vekŭt na tsar Simeon* (Sofia, 2014); Andreev, 62–72; I. Vŭlchev, *Tsar Simeon* (Sofia, 1965); J. Shepard, "Symeon of Bulgaria—Peacemaker," *GSUif* 83 (1989 [1994]): 9–48; G. Sergheraert [*pseud.*, C. Gerard], *Syméon le Grand (893–927)* (Paris, 1960).
2. Nich. Myst., *Letters*, #29.
3. Liudprand, *Retribution*, 124. *Ibid.*, #31, related that Simeon remained a student of "ancient history" throughout his life. Whether Simeon's title of "Half-Greek" stemmed from Byzantine admiration or sarcasm can be debated.
4. Traditional Bulgarian historiography holds that Simeon was a monk at the Patleina (or Ticha) Monastery, but recent archeological scholarship has raised doubts as to whether the site's remains represented a monastery or were the ruins of a Bulgarian secular noble's manor complex. See R. Kostova, "Bulgarian Monasteries, Ninth to Tenth Centuries: Interpreting the Archeological Evidence," *Pliska-Preslav* 8 (Sofia, 2000), 190–202.
5. The near-contemporary *The Miracle of St. George with the Bulgarian* stated specifically that Simeon "overthrew his brother and sat on the throne." See *Voices*, 44.
6. Simeon's self-analogy with Moses seems to have been a lifelong trait. See Nich. Myst., *Letters*, #25.
7. Browning, *Byzantium and Bulgaria*, 57–58, based on statements in Byzantine sources.
8. Shepard, "Symeon of Bulgaria," 15–16; Fine, *Early Medieval Balkans*, 137; S. Tougher, *The Reign of Leo VI (886–912): Politics and People* (Leiden, 1997), 174; Stephenson, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier*, 21; Toynbee, 520.
9. *The Book of the Eparch*, Iv. Duichev, ed., and E.H. Freshfield, trans. (London, 1970), chap. IX; G.I. Brătianu, "Le commerce bulgare dans l'Empire byzantin et le monopole de l'empereur Léon VI à Thessalonique," in *Sbornik Nikov: IBID*, nos. 16–18 (1940): 30–36; Toynbee, 61–62.

10. Theo. Cont., 121–122; Skylitzes, 169–170; Leo the Grammarian, 158; Geo. Mon. Cont., 138; Pseudo-Symeon, *Chronographia*, in *GIBI* 5, 176; Bozhilov, *Tsar Simeon*, 88–89; Zlatarski, *IBDSV* 1/2, 285–288; Runciman, *A History*, 144–145; Toynbee, 520.
11. Theo. Cont., 122; Skylitzes, 170; Leo the Grammarian, *ibid.*; Geo. Mon. Cont., 139; Pseudo-Symeon, *ibid.*; G. Tsankova-Petkova, “Pŭrvata vojna mezhdu Bŭlgariya i Vizantiya pri tsar Simeon i vŭzstanovyavaneto na bŭlgarskata tŭrgoviya s Tsarigrad,” *III* 20 (1968): 167f. Some scholars have claimed that Simeon’s was the first European war expressly caused by state “commercial interests.” See Mutafchiev, *IBN* 1, 210.
12. Zlatarski, *IBDSV* 1/2, 290–291; M. Voinov, “Promyanata v bŭlgarovizantiiskite odnosheniya pri tsar Simeon,” *III* 18 (1967): 174; Macartney, 177–178.
13. *AF*, 124; Róna-Tas, 331–332; A. Madgearu, “Salt Trade and Warfare: The Rise of the Romanian-Slavic Military Organization in Early Medieval Transylvania,” *East-Central and Eastern Europe in the Early Middle Ages*, F. Curta, ed. (Ann Arbor, MI, 2005), 106f.
14. Bowlus, 236f; Engel, 10–11; Lendvai, 18; Macartney, 71, 76–77; Toynbee, 452–453.
15. Theo. Cont., 122; Skylitzes, 170–171; Leo the Grammarian, 158; Pseudo-Symeon, 176; Geo. Mon. Cont., 139.
16. Skylitzes, 171; Zonaras, 173; G. Koliass, *Léon Choïrosphactès, magistre, proconsul et patrice* (Athens, 1939), 25.
17. Skylitzes, *ibid.*; Leo the Grammarian, *op. cit.*
18. Treadgold, *A History*, 464.
19. Róna-Tas, 332; Engel, 12.
20. *DAI*, chap. 51.
21. Because it provided a first-hand account of a Bulgarian levy recruit’s experiences in the battles against the Magyars, *The Miracle of St. George with the Bulgarian* (*Voices*, 44–46) is a remarkable early medieval military primary source. In his story, the narrator related that he was a common trooper without rank, that he was part of a group of 50 men who together fled the battlefield with arrow-firing Magyars in hot pursuit, and that, despite his horse being injured, he managed to outrun the enemy pursuers and return home unscathed, becoming one of only three men in the group to survive the affair.
22. *DAI*, chap. 40; *RPC*, 63–64; *AF*, 135–136. Simeon probably fought more than one engagement with the Magyars. See: *AF*, 136; *Taktika*, const. 18, Sect. 40. According to *The Miracle of St. George*, *ibid.*, after the first battle Simeon summoned his levies for a second time but no fighting subsequently occurred, so the levy-men returned home.

23. Theo. Cont., 123; Skylitzes, 171; Geo. Mon. Cont., 139; Leo the Grammarian, 159.
24. *DAI*, chaps. 3–4, 37–38; Macartney, pts. II and III, and *passim*; Róna-Tas, pt. 2, chap. IV, Sect. 3 g.
25. Iv. Bozhilov, “Bŭlgariya i pechenezite (896–1018),” *IPr*, no. 2 (1973): 37f.
26. Tsankova-Petkova, “Pŭrvata voina,” 182 n (for the location of Mundraga).
27. Koliass, 71–81; *Voices*, 47–48. At one point, Simeon made reference to Emperor Leo’s widely known successful prediction of a solar eclipse a few years earlier and then informed Khoirosphaktes that, if the emperor could successfully predict whether he intended to return the Byzantine prisoners in his hands, he would do so. When the ambassador, after corresponding with the imperial court, replied that Leo did not think that Simeon intended to return them, the Bulgarian ruler sarcastically answered that he had intended to do so, but since the emperor had guessed incorrectly, he no longer would! For good measure, Simeon branded Leo’s reputation for being “wise” as patently unfounded.
28. *AF*, 131 (noted that the Magyars lost “a great part” of their force), and 136 (exaggeratedly listed Bulgarian losses as 20,000 men).
29. *DAI*, chaps. 38–41; Theo. Cont., 123; Skylitzes, 171; Geo. Mon. Cont., 140; Róna-Tas, chap. VIII, Sect. 3; Moravcsik, 52–53; Macartney, excursus IV, and *passim*; Engel, 11–12; Lendvai, 19–20; Bozhilov, “Bŭlgariya i pechenezite,” 39 and n.
30. Theo. Cont., 123; Skylitzes, 171–172; Geo. Mon. Cont., 140; Leo the Grammarian, 159.
31. Treadgold, *A History*, 464.
32. Theo. Cont., 124; Skylitzes, 172–173; Geo. Mon. Cont., op. cit.; Leo the Grammarian, op. cit. For Emperor Leo impressing Muslim Arabs to help defend Constantinople, see the Arab *Chronicle* of al-Tabari, given in A.A. Vasiliev, *Byzance et les Arabes* 2, H. Grégoire and M. Canard, trans. (Brussels, 1950), 11–12.
33. Koliass, 32, 112–113; Mutafchiev, *IBN* 1, 215; Tougher, 179–180 (estimated the total number of returned Byzantine prisoners as 25,000). While most scholars agree that the Bulgarian marketplace was returned to Constantinople, a few (*ex.*, Runciman, *A History*, 148) thought the Bulgarian entrepôt remained in Thessaloniki. The date of the treaty has been much debated, with most opting for 896 or 897. Ivan Bozhilov (*Tsar Simeon*, 93–94; “A propos des rapports bulgare-byzantins sous le tzar Syméon (893–912),” *Bb* 6 [Sofia, 1980], 80; and *id.*, and Gyuzelev [248–249]) posited 899, based on a Byzantine ceremonial protocol issued in that year by Philotheos (*The Lists of Precedence*, in Constantine Porphyrogenetos, *The Book of Ceremonies* 2, A. Moffatt

- and M. Tall, trans. [Canberra, 2012]), in which Bulgarian emissaries to Constantinople were officially designated “guests” and held in high honor (740, 742, 743, 749, 751, 767, 768, 771, and 773), presumably as the result of a recent treaty.
34. Ioan Ekzarh, *Shestodnev*, given in *Voices*, 90–92. For Preslav under Simeon, see: T. Totev, *Great Preslav* (Sofia, 2001); id., et al., eds., *1100 godini Veliki Preslav I* (Shumen, 1995); R. Panova, *Stolichniyat grad v kulturnata na srednovekovna Bŭlgariya* Sofia, 1995)
  35. Koliaš, 113; Tsankova-Petkova, “Pŭrvata vojna,” 190, 198; Tougher, 181.
  36. Ostrogorsky, *History*, 257; Treadgold, *A History*, 467.
  37. Ostrogorsky, *ibid.*, 261–262; Treadgold, *Ibid.*
  38. Treadgold, *ibid.*, 464, 467; Zlatarski, *IBDSV* 1/2, 323f; Curta, *Southeastern Europe*, 201.
  39. Koliaš, 113; Toynbee, 106–107. For the stone boundary markers and their inscriptions, see: *Voices*, 37; I. Ivanov, *Bŭlgarski starini iz Makedoniya*, reprint ed. [of 1931, 2nd ed.] (Sofia, 1970), 18.
  40. Jenkins, *Imperial Centuries*, chap. 16; Treadgold, *A History*, 460, 465–468; Ostrogorsky, *History*, 259–260.
  41. Treadgold, *A History*, 470; Ostrogorsky, *History*, 261; Jenkins, *Imperial Centuries*, 227f. P. Karlin-Hayter, “The Emperor Alexander’s Bad Name,” *Speculum* 44 (1969): 585–596, argued that Alexander was a victim of prejudices in the extant sources and may not have been the deadbeat portrayed by them.
  42. Theo. Cont., 125; Skylitzes, 190; Leo the Grammarian, 160; Geo. Mon. Cont., 141; Pseudo-Symeon, 176.
  43. For Simeon using the “Roman” imperial title, see his seals in: *Voices*, 34; I. Iordanov, *Korpus na monetite i pechatite na srednovekovna Bŭlgariya* (Sofia, 2001), 47f; T.D. Gerasimov, “Tri starobŭlgarski molivdovula,” *IBAI* 8 (1934): 350f.
  44. See his seals in: *Voices*, *ibid.*; T.D. Gerasimov, “Novootkrit oloven pechat na tsar Simeon,” *IBAI* 23 (1960): 67–69; I. Yurukova and V. Penchev, eds., *Bŭlgarski srednovekovni pechati i moneti* (Sofia, 1990), 29–30. Concerning Preslav, see: *NCMH* 3, 572–573; Stephenson, *Byzantium’s Balkan Frontier*, 18–19. Regarding Mystikos’s letters to Simeon, it must be stressed that the extant collection was significantly redacted by the Byzantines after his death to harmonize with official interpretations of matters portrayed in its contents. See Whittow, 286.
  45. Stephenson, *ibid.*, 21–22.
  46. Treadgold, *A History*, 471–473; Ostrogorsky, *History*, 261–262; Jenkins, *Imperial Centuries*, 229–231.
  47. Nich. Myst., *Letters*, #3, 5, 6, 7.

48. Theo. Cont., 126; Skylitzes, 194–195; Leo the Grammarian, 160; Geo. Mon. Cont., 141–142.
49. Nich. Myst., *Letters*, #6. Although in letter #8 he discussed the 913 peace agreement in the most general of terms, its mention proves that a treaty had been struck.
50. *Ibid.*, #16; Bozhilov, *Tsar Simeon*, 108–109; Vlasto, 172–173.
51. There is a fifth interpretation of Simeon's coronation, which later Byzantine chroniclers asserted: It was merely a sham to remove the Bulgarians from before the capital as swiftly as possible. This assertion can be discounted as an expedient piece of medieval political spin doctoring but it became the official Byzantine view of the event by the time of Simeon's death. According to this version, Mystikos used a piece of cloth from his ecclesiastical habit's headgear instead of a crown, which Simeon failed to recognize during the ceremony. Simeon's decade-long, firsthand familiarity with Byzantine practices and his undoubted personal intelligence render ridiculous the contention that he was duped by such a ploy. The most blatant expression of the false coronation story was publicly pronounced by Theodore Daphnapates on the occasion of the peace settlement between the empire and Bulgaria following Simeon's death in 927. See: R.J.H. Jenkins, "The Peace with Bulgaria (927) Celebrated by Theodore Daphnapates," *Polychronion. Festschrift Franz Dölger zum 75. Geburtstag* (Heidelberg, 1966), 291, 295; Shepard, "Symeon of Bulgaria," 21–22.
52. For the coronation possibilities (including that it may never have happened), see: P. Georgiev, "Koronatsiyata na Simeon prez 913 g.," *Ipr* 57 (2001): 3–20; P. Karlin-Hayter, "The Homily of the Peace with Bulgaria of 927 and the 'Coronation' of 913," *JÖB* 17 (1968): 29–39; Iv. Snegarov, "Koronyasan li e bil knyaz Simeon v Tsarigrad prez 913 g.?" *GSUbf* 24 (1947): 1–47; G.A. Loud, "A Re-Examination of the Coronation of Symeon of Bulgaria in 913," *JTS* 29 (Apr, 1978): 109–120.
53. Ostrogorsky, *History*, 263; Treadgold, *A History*, 473–474; Jenkins, *Imperial Centuries*, 232–233.
54. Skylitzes, 196. For the campaign, see: Leo the Deacon, *The History of...: Byzantine Military Expansion in the Tenth Century*, A.-M. Talbot and D.F. Sullivan, eds. and trans. (Washington, DC, 2005), 171; Theo. Cont., 127; Leo the Grammarian, 161; Geo. Mon. Cont., 142; Pseudo-Symeon, 177; Zonaras, 174. Shepard, "Symeon of Bulgaria," doubted that the 914 campaign occurred.
55. Nich. Myst., *Letters*, #9.
56. *DAI*, chap. 32; Curta, *Southeastern Europe*, 211–212; Fine, *Early Medieval Balkans*, 141–142, 148; Ćirković, 16f.



57. *DAI*, *ibid.* Bozhilov, “Bŭlgariya i pechenezite,” 42f, 47f, posited that Simeon’s negotiations with the Pechenegs kept the Magyars out of the impending conflict by winning the allegiance of some Pecheneg tribes from western Etelköz.
58. *Nich. Myst.*, *Letters*, #9; Bozhilov, “Bŭlgariya i pechenezite,” 51–152, 52 n.
59. *Nich. Myst.*, *ibid.*
60. Treadgold, *A History*, 474.
61. *Theo. Cont.*, 127; Skylitzes, 196; Leo the Grammarian, 160–161; Geo. Mon. *Cont.*, 142; Pseudo-Symeon, 177.
62. Haldon, *Byzantine Wars*, 88.
63. *Theo. Cont.*, 128; Skylitzes, 197; Jenkins, *Imperial Centuries*, 234; Ostrogorsky, *History*, 263; Runciman, *Romanus Lecapenus*, 54.
64. *Theo. Cont.*, *ibid.*; Skylitzes, *ibid.*
65. Skylitzes, 198.
66. Bozhilov, “Bŭlgariya i pechenezite,” 52–53; Toynbee, 457 n.
67. Skylitzes, 197–199.
68. *Ibid.*, 197–198; *Theo. Cont.*, 128–129. In his *Byzantine Wars* (88), John Haldon used this account to illustrate his contention that “discipline and chance” plagued Byzantine military efforts from the mid-eighth through the early tenth centuries.
69. Skylitzes, 198–199; Leo the Deacon, 170–171; Zonaras, 175.
70. For alternative reconstructions of the battle, see: *BVIF*, 180–181; M. Nikolov, “20. VIII. 917 godina. Edna hipoteza po vŭprosa – Zashto naizhestokata bitka mezhdu Bŭlgariya i Vizantiya pri upravlenieto na tsar Simeon se e sŭstoiala na Anhialskoto pole,” in *Nauchni izsledvaniya v chest na professor Ivan Karaiotov*, 326–332; *IB* 5 VI, 92–93; S.T. Nedev, “Srazhenieto pri reka Ahelo prez 917 g.,” *VISb*, no. 4 (1975): 142–154.
71. Simeon personally participated in the combat at Aheloi; his horse received a wound in the fighting that left a lasting scar. See *Nich. Myst.*, *Letters*, #31. The piles of bones from the battle scattered about the plain remained discernible on the surface during the times of Liudprand (*Retribution*, 124) and Leo the Deacon (171–172), who wrote in the later 900s.
72. In a diplomatic effort to retard Simeon’s advance, Zoë had Patriarch Mystikos contact him. In his missive (*Nich. Myst.*, *ibid.*, #9), the patriarch, who disclaimed any responsibility for events leading to the war, struck a conciliatory tone, admitting that the Byzantine resort to arms against Bulgaria had been unwarranted but not altogether unprovoked and apologizing for not airing the apparent provocations with Simeon prior to the opening of hostilities. Mystikos closed by appealing to

- Simeon's Christian principles to persuade him to cease his advance and make peace. Simeon's response was to insult Mystikos as a "dotard." See *ibid.*, #10.
73. Theo. Cont., 129; Skylitzes, 199; Geo. Mon. Cont., 144; Leo the Grammarian, 162; Zonaras, 175–176. Skylitzes and Zonaras claimed that Simeon was defeated at Katasyrtai.
  74. Browning, *Byzantium and Bulgaria*, 64.
  75. *DAI*, chap. 32.
  76. *Ibid.*
  77. Treadgold, *A History*, 475; Jenkins, *Imperial Centuries*, 235–236; Runciman, *Romanus Lecapenus*, 57f.
  78. Runciman, *A History*, 162; Fine, *Early Medieval Balkans*, 150; Browning, *Byzantium and Bulgaria*, 64–65.
  79. *Vita Lucae Iunioris*, in *GIBI* 5, 232–234; Kekavmenos, *Strategikon*, in *GIBI* 7, 19–20; Nich. Myst., *Letters*, #13 (a 918/19 letter to Simeon's *kavhan* decrying the horrors of the recent warfare, most likely in Greece); Bozhilov and Gyuzelev, 257; Zlatarski, *IBDSV* 1/2, 395–396; Runciman, *ibid.*, 159.
  80. For Simeon contacting the Tarsus Arabs, see: The record of al-Masudi, in A.A. Vasiliev, *Byzance et les Arabes* 2, H. Grégoire and M. Canard, trans. (Brussels, 1950), 32; Fine, *ibid.*, 152; Toynbee, 337. See: Treadgold, *A History*, 475–476; Ostrogorsky, *History*, 264; Runciman, *Romanus Lecapenus*, 58f; and Jenkins, *Imperial Centuries*, 236f, for the rise of Lekapenos.
  81. al-Masudi, *ibid.*; Nich. Myst., *op. cit.*, #95 (to Lekapenos); Zlatarski, *IBDSV* 1/2, 401–402; Runciman, *ibid.*, 87; Treadgold, *ibid.*, 476.
  82. *DAI*, chap. 32; Ćirković, 18. Zlatarski (*ibid.*, 413–414) dated the event to 922, while Bozhilov and Gyuzelev (258) and Fine (*op. cit.*) gave 921. The lone written primary source for early Raškan Serb history through the time of Simeon is *DAI*, chap. 32, but it provided almost no concrete dates for the events portrayed. Since Serbian historians generally date the beginning of Zaharije's eventual reign as Raškan *knez* to 920 (see Ćirković), it appears logical that his unsuccessful bid for the throne occurred the previous year, in 919.
  83. Ostrogorsky, *History*, 264; Treadgold, *A History*, *op. cit.*; Runciman, *Romanus Lecapenus*, 59f; Jenkins, *Imperial Centuries*, 237f.
  84. *DAI*, chap. 32. Most scholars date the events to 921, but Runciman claimed 923. Our study follows Serbian scholarly opinion in opting for 920, justified by the fact that all non-Serbian scholars claimed Simeon conducted no anti-Byzantine military operations throughout that year, but provided no credible reasons for his inaction. There was one good possible explanation. Given that, since 914 Simeon had initiated

major military operations in every year except two—915 and 916—coupled with Lekapenos's moves during the year to attain the imperial throne, it seems logical that Simeon would have militarily intervened in Byzantium during 920 were he not seriously distracted by events in Raška.

85. Treadgold, *op. cit.*
86. Nich. Myst., *Letters*, #16, 17.
87. *Ibid.*, #18.
88. Theo. Cont., 130; Skylitzes, 207–208; Geo. Mon. Cont., 144; Leo the Grammarian, 162. Bulgarian scholars follow Zlatarski (*IBDSV* 1/2, 409 and n) in considering the action at Thermopolis part of a separate campaign undertaken by Pothos into Bulgarian territory, with Thermopolis located near the Bulgarian village of Aitoski bani (L: Aquae calidae), in the Balkan Mountains west of Ankhialos.
89. For the suburb's location, see: Janin, 142–143; Van Millingen, 210.
90. Theo. Cont., 130–131; Skylitzes, 208–209; Leo the Grammarian, 163; Geo. Mon. Cont., 145–46. Both Runciman (*A History*, 166) and Treadgold (*op. cit.*, 477–478) dated the battle to 922.
91. Such a strategy was first implemented by the Athenian Perikles against invading Spartans in the early stages of the Peloponnesian Wars. See D. Kagan, *The Peloponnesian War* (New York, 2003), 51f.
92. Nich. Myst., *Letters*, #20.
93. *DAI*, chap. 50; R.J.H. Jenkins, "The Date of the Slav Revolt in Peloponnese under Romanus I," *Late Classical and Mediaeval Studies in Honor of Albert Mathias Friend, Jr.* (Princeton, NJ, 1955), 205–206; Treadgold, *A History*, 477.
94. *Vita Mariae Junioris*, in *GIBI* 5, 75–81, for Simeon capturing Bizya.
95. Janin, 145, 467; Bozhilov and Gyuzelev, 258 and n.
96. Theo. Cont., 131–132; Skylitzes, 209–210; Leo the Grammarian, 163–164; Geo. Mon. Cont., 146; Runciman, *A History*, 166 and n; Treadgold, *A History*, 478.
97. That Slavs in Byzantium's Greek lands were chronically disaffected with Romanos's rule, see Liudprand, *Retribution*, 119. For the 922 Bulgarian conquests in Greece, see: A.A. Vasiliev, "The 'Life' of St. Peter of Argos and Its Historical Significance," *Traditio* 5 (1947): 181–182; Jenkins, "Slav Revolt," 205–206 and n; Treadgold, *ibid.*, and n.
98. Nich. Myst., *Letters*, #23.
99. Theo. Cont., 132; Skylitzes, 211; Leo the Grammarian, 164; Geo. Mon. Cont., 146–147; Bozhilov and Gyuzelev, 259 (dated the siege to 924); Zlatarski, *IBDSV* 1/2, 413, 425 (claimed that the siege lasted from 921 to 922).
100. Zlatarski, *ibid.*, 446; Fine, *Early Medieval Balkans*, 152.

101. *DAI*, chap. 32.
102. Theo. Cont., 132; Skylitzes, 211; Leo the Grammarian, 164; Geo. Mon. Cont., 147.
103. Skylitzes, 253–254 (noted that the annual tribute paid Ubaydallah by Byzantium was 22,000 gold pieces). For general relations among Bulgaria, Byzantium, and the Arabs, see: K.S. Krüstev, “Bŭlgariya, Vizantiya i Arabskiyat svyat pri tsaruvaneto na Simeon I Veliki,” in *Bŭlgarskiyat zlaten vek. Sbornik v chest na tsar Simeon Veliki (893–927)*, V. Gyuzelev, et al., eds. (Plovdiv, 2015): 361–378; id., “Bŭlgararabskite otnosheniya pri tsaruvaneto na Simeon I Veliki (893–927) i edna mitologema v uchebnitsite po istoriya,” *Istoriya* 21, no. 3 (2013): 202–206.
104. In the previous year (923) Simeon sent letters to leading patricians in Constantinople, instead of to the emperor, arguing his case for imperial recognition based on the Hebdomon agreement, as well as for Romanos’s deposition, in an attempt to fan their discontent with the usurper while instilling distrust of them in the emperor. See: Nich. Myst., *Letters*, #28; *NCMH* 3, 577.
105. For Simeon’s increasingly contemptuous attitude toward Mystikos, see the patriarch’s self-defensive comments in Nich. Myst., *ibid.*, #20, 25, 29, 31.
106. *ODB* 3, 1616.
107. Runciman, *Romanus Lecapenus*, app. I.
108. Byzantine source accounts of the meeting were: Theo. Cont., 132–135; Skylitzes, 211–213; Leo the Grammarian, 164–166; Geo. Mon. Cont., 147–149; Nich. Myst., *Letters*, #30, 31 (the latter mentioned Simeon’s battle-scarred horse from Aheloi); and the 927 oration of Theodore Daphnopates in Jenkins, “The Peace with Bulgaria,” 287–303. All portray Simeon, his ambitions on the Byzantine imperial throne in tatters, suing for peace and his blustering swaggering squelched by Romanos’s humility and eloquent reprimand of his militant actions on Christian moral grounds. Some include an omen represented by two eagles flying over the meeting, briefly joining, and then heading in opposite directions—one toward Thrace and the other toward Constantinople—with various implied portents.
109. For modern depictions of the 924 campaign and jetty meeting (many of which accept the Byzantine portrayal), see: Bozhilov and Gyuzelev, 259; Zlatarski, *IBDSV* 1/2, 448f; Mutafchiev, *IBN* 1, 235–237; *IB* 2, 291; Hr. Trendafilov, “Tsar-simeonoviyat gastrol na 9.IX (923/924): Dekonstruksiya na arhitipa,” in *Ottuka zapochva Bŭlgariya. Materiali*, V. Gyuzelev, ed. (Shumen, 2011): 311–329; Runciman, *A History*,

- 169f; id., *Romanus Lecapenus*, 90f; Browning, *Byzantium and Bulgaria*, 66–67; id., *Byzantine Empire*, 107; Fine, *Early Medieval Balkans*, 153–154; Obolensky, *Byzantine Commonwealth*, 112; Curta, *Southeastern Europe*, 226–227; Ostrogorsky, *History*, 265–266; Jenkins, *Imperial Centuries*, 242–243; Treadgold, *A History*, 478; Whittow, 291; NCMH 3, 577–578; Shepard, “Symeon—Peacemaker,” 25f; Stephenson, *Byzantium’s Balkan Frontier*, 23.
110. See Nich. Myst., op. cit.; Theodore Daphnopates, *Correspondance*, J. Darrouzès and L.G. Westerink, eds. and trans. (Paris, 1976), 56–85; *Voices*, 34; Gerasimov, “Tri starobŭlgarski molivdovula,” 350–351; Zlatarski, *ibid.*, 389f; Vlasto, 173; Runciman, *ibid.*, 174; Browning, *ibid.*, 67; Fine, *ibid.*, 156; Obolenski, *ibid.*, 115; Curta, *ibid.*, 227.
111. *DAI*, chap. 32; Zlatarski, *ibid.*, 458 n; Runciman, *ibid.*, 287.
112. *DAI*, *ibid.*
113. Guldescu, 108f; Tanner, 9f; Fine, *Early Medieval Balkans*, 262f; Curta, *Southeastern Europe*, 193f.
114. Fine, *ibid.*, 263–264.
115. *DAI*, chap. 32. Runciman, *A History*, 285, demonstrated that the commander’s name probably was a corrupted Bulgarian title—some form of *bagatur*—and not his proper name.
116. *DAI*, *ibid.*; Theo. Cont., 135; Skylitzes, 214.
117. Simeon’s good relations with the papacy began in 923 when papal legates first appeared in his court at Preslav by way of Constantinople, sent on with the blessings of Patriarch Mystikos in hopes of their convincing Simeon to sue for peace. See Nich. Myst., *Letters*, #28. Instead, Simeon opened talks with them aimed at gaining papal recognition of his imperial standing.
118. Guldescu, 117f; Tanner, 9f; Fine, *ibid.*, 266f; Curta, *ibid.*, 196f; Vlasto, 196f.
119. Leo the Grammarian, 167; Iv. Duichev, *Medioevo bizantino-slavo 3. Altri saggi di storia politica e culturale* (Rome, 1971), 199. Having been unsuccessful in quashing Simeon while he was alive, the Christian Byzantines found compensation by later manufacturing a story in which they ultimately prevailed in the long struggle with him by resorting to pagan sorcery, killing Simeon through destroying his *stoikheion* (Gr: An inanimate object believed to be the spiritual double of a human), which a certain astronomer named John “discovered” was a statue located in one of Constantinople’s public squares. When the said sculpture was decapitated, Simeon instantaneously died! For this bizarre tale, see: Theo. Cont., 135; Skylitzes, 214–215.

## Interlude: From Wary Peace Through Rus’ Intervention, 927–971

Prior to his death in May 927 Simeon made it known that he wished his adolescent eldest son by his second marriage—Petūr—to succeed him, despite having previously sired a son—Mihail—by his first wife, whom he had relegated to a monastery. The reasons for his decision remain unknown. After Simeon’s passing, the *bolyari* duly elevated young Petūr to the throne. Although the new monarch was nearing his majority,

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The following works provided the basic informational framework for the text of this chapter treating the reign of Petūr I and the Rus’ intervention: Bozhilov and Gyuzelev, pt. 3, chap. 5; Zlatarski, *IBDSV* 1/2, 495–618; Mutafchiev, *IBN* 1, chaps. X–XI; *IB* 2, pt. IV, chaps. 1–3; Andreev, 73–81; Tzvetkov, 137–143; N. Filipov, *Petūr i padaneto na Iztocna Bŭlgariya* (Sofia, 1930); Runciman, *A History*, bk. III, chaps. I–II; Browning, *Byzantium and Bulgaria*, 67–73; Fine, *Early Medieval Balkans*, 159–188; id., “A Fresh Look at Bulgaria under Tsar Peter (927–969),” *BS/EB* 5 (1978): 88–95; K. Marinow, “Hémos comme barrier militaire. L’analyse des écrits historiques de Léon le Diacre et de Jean Scylitzès au sujet de la champagne de guerre des empereurs byzantins Nicéphore II Phocas en 967 et de Jean I Tzymiscès en 971,” *Bulgaria Mediaevalis* 2 (2011): 443–466; Curta, *Southeastern Europe*, 227–240 and *passim*; *NCMH* 3, 579–585; Obolensky, *Byzantine Commonwealth*, 113–120, 126–130; Stephenson, *Byzantium’s Balkan Frontier*, 23–28, 47–55, and *passim*; Whittow, 260–262, 292–296; Treadgold, *A History*, chaps. 15–16; Ostrogorsky, *History*, chap. IV., sects. 4–6; Jenkins, *Imperial Centuries*, chaps. 20–21.

a leading *bolyar*, Georgi Sursuval, was named guardian-regent and chief councilor until he came fully of age.<sup>1</sup>

While the Bulgarian leadership abided by Simeon's wishes out of respect for his memory, the *bolyari* remained uncertain about their state's future now that Simeon's commanding presence was gone. Past warfare with Byzantium had resulted only in a truce, hence a technical state of war persisted after 924. The Byzantines displayed no overt signs of renewing hostilities but the recent war with Croatia demonstrated they retained the diplomatic potential to threaten the state through allied surrogates, and rumors were circulating that attempts were afoot to incite Bulgaria's Magyar and Pecheneg northern neighbors to attack. By concentrating almost exclusively on the war with Byzantium and problems with Raškan Serbia during the previous decade, Bulgaria had lost most of its trans-Danubian possessions to those two peoples, who now were ensconced north of the Danube, opposite Bulgaria's heartlands, and able to strike swiftly with little advanced warning. Pro-Byzantine Croatia, in the northwest, compounded the danger. Sursuval was imposed on Petūr's government to formulate a policy addressing such matters while helping consolidate the *bolyari's* loyalty to the new ruler.<sup>2</sup>

Facing a widespread famine caused by a plague of locusts, soon after Petūr was installed, he and Sursuval launched a major military campaign against Byzantium in Thrace to replenish the state's food supplies.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, they had to dispel questions concerning Bulgaria's continued military capabilities that had arisen as a result of the defeat suffered in Croatia. A forceful military thrust against the Byzantines' remaining Thracian holdings might compel them to negotiate a binding peace settlement on terms favorable to Bulgaria. Victory would vindicate the Bulgarians' continued military might, cement Petūr's position as ruler, and intimidate Bulgaria's neighbors.

Sometime in summer 927 the Bulgarians struck, meeting weak resistance from local thematic forces. Emperor Romanos I had taken advantage of the truce with Bulgaria to concentrate on eastern military affairs against the Arabs in Armenia.<sup>4</sup> With his military priorities focused on campaigning in that region, he could not reinforce the hard-pressed thematic troops opposing the Bulgarian incursion. If left unchecked, the situation raised the specter of Byzantium losing most of its southeastern Balkan holdings. Romanos needed to end the Bulgarian threat as expeditiously as possible. Given his military predicament, the only logical option was a definitive peace settlement with the invaders' new ruler.<sup>5</sup>

A Bulgarian-Byzantine treaty officially ending hostilities was struck in early October 927 at Constantinople. According to its terms, Bulgaria relinquished all Byzantine territories conquered by Simeon after 913, reestablishing the states' common borders defined by the 896/897 and 904 treaties, but retained most of Macedonia and Albania as well as the Black Sea coast north of Debeltos. Byzantium regained all central and southern Thrace, the Black Sea coast from Debeltos south, and most of mainland Greece. A few thousand Byzantine prisoners in Bulgarian hands were exchanged. Romanos officially recognized Petūr's title as Bulgarian emperor (but not as an imperial equal) and accepted the autocephalous Bulgarian Orthodox patriarchate's existence (whose seat was relocated from Preslav to Drūstūr). Bulgarian ambassadors to the Byzantine court were granted permanent precedence, as representatives of the only other imperial state acknowledged by Byzantium. To seal the agreement, Romanos proffered his granddaughter Maria in marriage to Petūr and renewed the annual tribute payments to Preslav (as annual subsidies supporting the imperial bride).<sup>6</sup>

The marriage of Petūr and Maria took place at Constantinople with all due imperial splendor. Romanos staged the three-day event to extract as much propaganda benefit as possible, holding the wedding ceremony in the rebuilt Church of the Virgin in Pege (ruined by Simeon's troops in 924) and throwing a magnificent reception on the wharf at Pegai (where six years earlier the Bulgarians crushed a Byzantine tagmatic force). The symbolic significance of the sites was inescapable: Defeats were transformed into victories; Byzantium unexpectedly triumphed over its Balkan enemy; and success was due to its Lekapenan ruler. It mattered little that the public imagery bore no true relationship to the situation's reality. Romanos achieved his intended impact on his subjects.<sup>7</sup>

When the wedding festivities concluded, the Bulgarians departed home, carrying with them Petūr's new empress (B: *tsarina*), her personal entourage, and her valuable trousseau. They evacuated those Thracian lands restored to Byzantium by the treaty's terms, leaving a swath of devastation in their wake, the long war provoked by Zoë's regency-government in 917 finally ended, and a four-decade period of peace ensued.

By compelling Romanos to accept peace terms, the Bulgarians emerged as victors. Petūr attained after one campaign the goals his father spent a frustrating decade of warfare seeking—Byzantium's official recognition of his Bulgarian imperial title and a marriage alliance with the house of the Orthodox God's earthly viceroy. The official acceptance



of the Bulgarian patriarchate, a necessary component partner of state government in the Orthodox imperial model, cemented Petŭr's status granted by the treaty. Bulgaria's control of its Balkan territories north of the 896/897 and 904 common border was acknowledged, and their inhabitants were spared service in annual military levies, permitting them to conduct uninterrupted productive lives, to the benefit of the Bulgarian state.<sup>8</sup>

Petŭr ruled the Bulgarian Empire for 42 years yet relatively little is factually known of his reign until near its conclusion. Satisfied by his gains in 927 and personally pious and peace-loving by nature, he undertook no military operations against Byzantium after concluding the treaty.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, Bulgaria received scant attention in the extant Byzantine sources treating that time. Only a few items of written evidence from Bulgaria, and mention of Bulgaria in even fewer extant foreign (that is, non-Bulgarian and non-Byzantine) texts, exist.

Despite the paucity of documentation, historians have long portrayed Petŭr's Bulgaria as a state in decline, wracked by political and social tensions and plagued by military and economic exhaustion.<sup>10</sup> The dismal picture of post-927 Bulgaria has been seriously questioned in more recent scholarship. Other than a few specific events for which there exist written source evidence—a brief period of rebellions by two of Petŭr's brothers soon after the treaty was signed; the loss of Raŝkan Serbia a few years later; a series of Magyar and Pecheneg raids; and the emergence of the Bogomil heresy—nothing factual is known about Petŭr's reign until the mid 960s. All the bleak portrayals of Bulgaria under his watch were based on negative hypotheses that, over time, gained acceptance as truth. While such postulates may reflect actual developments, it is just as likely they do not because no concrete evidence exists supporting contentions of Bulgaria's military, economic, political, and social decline during the period.<sup>11</sup>

The hypothetical constructs for Petŭr's Bulgaria negatively contrast his pacific reign to that imagined of his militant father. He fought no wars, therefore he must have been weak and his military exhausted. This supposition assumes that Petŭr's pacifism automatically entailed weakness (which is never necessarily the case) and that Bulgaria's military strength was ruined by Simeon's persistent warfare. Such an assumption runs counter to logic. The nature of the warfare fought by Simeon—raids and sieges with few pitched battles—would not naturally have entailed huge Bulgarian casualties. Total Bulgarian losses in Simeon's wars, therefore,

probably were not crippling nor posed an inordinate drain on the state's manpower. Since Simeon's Bulgaria rarely was invaded or devastated, fresh military reserves were available. Rather than a force reduced and exhausted by constant warfare, it is likely that Petŭr inherited a military as strong as Simeon's.<sup>12</sup>

The fact that Petŭr failed to prevent the Magyars from raiding through Bulgaria against Byzantium four times during his reign (934, 943, 958, and 961 [or 962]) has led scholars to assume that Bulgaria was militarily crippled. While Petŭr's pacific policies may have resulted in devoting more state resources to non-military projects than had Simeon, the army appears to have remained whole and intact. The simple failure to prevent or repulse the raids cannot be used to draw categorically negative conclusions regarding Bulgarian military capabilities under Petŭr. Mass lightning raids by aggressive and mobile intruders proved exceedingly difficult to stop for all settled early medieval European states, as the Magyars' numerous incursions into Frank-held western territories demonstrated prior to 955. Lacking corroborating evidence, it can be asked how the mere fact of four Magyar raids through Bulgaria definitively reflected Bulgarian military weakness.<sup>13</sup> The same can be said regarding a Pecheneg raid into Dobruzhan Bulgaria in 944, of which nothing is known other than it seems to have occurred.<sup>14</sup>

Regarding economic exhaustion, the traditional dire assessment does not harmonize with wartime conditions seemingly holding during Simeon's reign. The only obvious negative factor was the yearly drain on workforce numbers caused by annual military levies, but these would not have entailed most of the total male population, and war losses probably were not exorbitant. With Bulgaria free of enemy invasion for 30 years, its lands were not devastated and so its domestic economy was not unduly interrupted. Simeon's campaigns were conducted mostly in enemy territory and significant quantities of booty, both material and human, were won, possibly offsetting any short-term, negative economic impacts through plentiful war spoils.

Foreign commerce suffered some decline during Simeon's wars. Byzantium was Bulgaria's chief trading partner and the persistent hostilities characterizing the last decade of his reign largely closed that market. Although that situation represented a serious blow to Bulgaria's commercial sector, the state's location on the land and maritime trade routes linking Central Europe and Western Eurasia to Constantinople may have prevented it from becoming economically devastating. Foreign

merchants traveling to or from Byzantium could pause and ply their trades in Bulgarian markets. Thus Bulgarian commerce probably was harmed but not ruined by Simeon's incessant warfare. After the 927 treaty was concluded, trade with Byzantium fully resumed and enjoyed four decades of peace under Petŭr to flourish and grow.<sup>15</sup>

Between 927 and 930 Petŭr was forced to suppress rebellions by his brother Ivan and half-brother Mihail. Although the rebels seemingly gained some limited *bolyar* support, such backing apparently was weak and could not prevent the *tsar* from handily subduing both uprisings.<sup>16</sup> Petŭr faced no further revolts during the remaining 38 years of his reign, a fact that should dispel contentions that he was an emasculated ruler lacking broad-based *bolyar* support.<sup>17</sup> Around 931 the captive Serbian prince Časlav Klonimirović escaped detention in Preslav, made his way to Raška, and reestablished Raškan Serbia as a Byzantine protectorate. A rebounding Raškan Serb state quickly became a functioning political reality under the authority of its new *knez* (ca. 931–ca. 960) and the umbrella of Byzantine support.<sup>18</sup> Petŭr, committed to maintaining peace with Byzantium and its attendant state benefits, was forced to accept the *fait accompli* in Raška to preserve the peace with Byzantium.

The most damning purported evidence for hypothesizing that Bulgaria was rent by social dissention during Petŭr's reign was the rise of the Bogomil Christian heresy within its borders. A dualistic religious belief system, Bogomilism pitted a "good" spiritual against an "evil" material reality and rejected most mainstream Christian doctrines and nearly all expressions of institutionalized Christianity.<sup>19</sup> The Bogomils' worldview carried social ramifications. They held that all institutionalized social organizations, along with their attendant hierarchies, were fabrications of the wicked material realm. Believers were not bound either to obey or work for those who claimed religious, political, or social authority over them.

Although traditionally portrayed as a widespread, mass movement expressing the Bulgarian peasant majority's discontent over increasing exploitation by the state and an expanding landholding elite, such a contention is merely hypothesis grounded in little or no concrete source evidence for the period.<sup>20</sup> The one brief reference to Bogomil civil disobedience gave no indication of the extent to which such ideas were promulgated or held.<sup>21</sup> Modern historical and anthropological studies have shown that the illiterate peasants of the period displayed little concern for religious doctrine of any kind, whether pre-Christian

or Christian. What mattered foremost to them was tradition and ritual. Long-held pre-Christian rituals were valued and steadfastly preserved for the express purpose of ensuring the material wellbeing of the peasants' persons, families, animals, and crops. When accepting Christianity, they did so by merging existing pre-Christian rituals with the new belief without regard for doctrinal concerns, about which they understood little and cared even less. Well over 90% of Bulgaria's tenth-century population was comprised of such peasants. By Petŭr's time they had been "officially" converted to Orthodox Christianity through six decades of concerted efforts, and the amalgamation of their traditional rituals to an Orthodox Christian veneer was successfully entrenched. The Bogomil doctrine, with its sophisticated, complex theology and utter rejection of material reality, was the antithesis of the peasants' approach to religion, which was entirely concerned with material matters in the "here-and-now" world.<sup>22</sup>

Rather than a mass movement expressing peasant social discontent, Bogomilism appears to have been a rather small phenomenon limited to a few, more intellectually sophisticated clerics, whose number and significance were magnified by the religious hypersensitivity of the Orthodox ecclesiastical and governmental authorities in both Bulgaria and Byzantium. In Bulgaria, the heresy probably persisted as a low-level spiritual nuisance for the authorities until the end of the hegemonic wars, after which it gained increased popularity among religious intellectuals of the occupying Byzantines, whose documented inequitable social realities actually did spawn conditions conducive for it serving as a vehicle of dissent.<sup>23</sup>

Standing in contradiction to the traditionally negative portrayal of Petŭr's Bulgaria is a small body of evidence that has gained recent scholarly notice. In a mid tenth-century anti-Bogomil sermon, Kosmas portrayed a spiritually sophisticated and materially buoyant Bulgarian Christian society, within which wealth and books were common. A Jewish traveler (965) noted that, as befitting a great ruler, Petŭr's administrative offices in Preslav sported a large, efficient, and productive secretariat, while a Kievan Rus' ruling prince (968) jealously commented that Danubian Bulgaria was a nexus of commercial activity and wealth.<sup>24</sup> Archeological efforts at Preslav have unearthed extensive renovation and expansion work on the palace during Petŭr's time as well as enlargement of the capital's commercial quarters. Those endeavors also have uncovered evidence for the construction of wealthy *bolyar* residences

in Preslav's immediate vicinity and rich caches of assorted craft products, all implying growth in available wealth during his reign. Some 21 seals of Petŭr have been discovered (far more than from his father and grandfather combined), with more than half found in or near the capital, suggesting his central government maintained active oversight of its domestic administration. In the state's provinces, forts were erected under Petŭr on the High Thracian Plain and richly decorated churches were raised in Bulgarian-held Kastoria.<sup>25</sup> Such evidence, combined with new perspectives derived from "debunking" the traditional bleak hypotheses, have led some recent historians to judge Petŭr's Bulgaria a strong, stable, and flourishing state, requiring continued watchfulness on the part of its Byzantine neighbor, and more deserving of representing the apex of medieval Bulgaria's "Golden Age" than the state under Simeon.<sup>26</sup>

Two deaths occurred in 963 that portended fateful consequences for the Bulgarian Empire: Bulgarian Tsarina Maria and Byzantine Emperor Romanos II (959–963), the heir of Constantine VII).<sup>27</sup> The former raised the question of continued Byzantine tribute payments to Petŭr under the 927 treaty while the latter resulted in bringing the militant Nikephoros II Phokas (963–969) to Byzantium's imperial throne.<sup>28</sup> The repercussions of both ultimately led to the near fatal collapse of Bulgaria's fortunes.

Soon after his wife's passing, Petŭr contacted the Byzantine authorities attempting to guarantee continued peaceful relations between the two empires. He may have undertaken this initiative to clarify the terms of the 927 treaty regarding the tribute payments he received while Maria was alive. Whatever the reasons for the negotiations, Petŭr felt constrained to send his two adult sons, Boris and Roman, to reside in Constantinople as pledges of his good faith.<sup>29</sup>

On his death, Romanos II left two very young sons and heirs to the Byzantine throne, Basil II (five years old) and Constantine VIII (aged three), along with their highly ambitious mother-regent Theophano. To secure her sons' imperial birthrights, later in 963 Theophano supported the successful coup of Nikephoros Phokas, Byzantium's most renowned contemporary general. She soon thereafter married him, rendering the military hero her children's stepfather and co-emperor and preserving the continuity of the Macedonian dynasty.

Nikephoros was a gruff, austere man whose abiding interests were focused on military affairs. He headed the Phokai family, who by the

mid-tenth century led a coterie of powerful eastern provincial magnate families that dominated Byzantium's military establishment. Centuries of defensive warfare with the Arabs had spawned among them a fervent desire to abandon the traditional passive posture and begin offensively hitting back against their enemies. During his reign he transformed Byzantium's grand strategy from one grounded in defensive priorities into one embracing offensive possibilities. He earned his reputation as the premier Byzantine military commander of his day by striking his enemies fast and hard with forces reorganized and honed for conducting effective offensive operations through extensive training in new tactics, the imposition of strict discipline, and the introduction of more heavily armored and professional units. Although all of Nikephoros's military experience prior to attaining the throne lay in combatting Arabs, his family possessed a history of fighting Bulgarians. His grandfather (Nikephoros), father (Bardas), and uncle (Leo) had campaigned against Simeon with little success. Perhaps that sad family military tradition regarding Bulgaria crossed Nikephoros's mind when, in late 965 or early 966, a delegation from Preslav appeared in Constantinople requesting continued payment of the tribute granted Bulgaria by the 927 treaty.<sup>30</sup>

Nikephoros was in no mood to make payments to the Bulgarians. He received the delegation in an angrily insulting manner, publicly demonstrating he considered their request officially and personally offensive.<sup>31</sup> There existed an additional, perhaps more significant, reason for Nikephoros's ire with Bulgaria. Petŭr's diplomacy with the Magyars had resulted in an arrangement that abrogated Bulgaria's usefulness as a buffer against raids on Byzantine Balkan territories by those Pannonian warriors. Sometime between 965 and 968 two bands of Magyar raiders ravaged Byzantine regions near Thessaloniki and in Western Thrace after passing through Bulgarian territory, apparently without incident. Later in 966 Nikephoros contacted Petŭr demanding that he curb Magyar incursions but the Bulgarian ruler replied that, unlike the Byzantines, he was unprepared to renege on his sworn word.<sup>32</sup>

Angered by the Bulgarians' effrontery in requesting tribute, after dismissing their embassy Nikephoros launched a quick military strike to intimidate them. In 966 he led his troops through Thrace to the border with Bulgaria, where they staged demonstrations along the Great Fence and stormed some of the forts guarding its length. If Nikephoros entertained any idea of expanding operations beyond the border, it was dispelled by the lay of the land, his sense of history, and his own overriding

military priorities. After ravaging the border and venting his spleen in a diplomatic exchange with Petūr, Nikephoros withdrew his forces and returned to Constantinople.<sup>33</sup>

Back in his capital, the emperor learned that, while he undertook operations against Bulgaria, Byzantium's Crimean holdings had come under threat from Kievan Grand Prince Svyatoslav (964–972) and his Rus' forces. The Rus' staged three violent naval attacks on Constantinople in the past (860, 907, and 941) and their current ruler earned a reputation as an aggressive and successful military commander in campaigns on the steppes.<sup>34</sup> Nikephoros recognized that the menace posed to Kherson by the Rus' was not to be taken lightly, but implementation of a planned eastern offensive precluded him from diverting forces to deal adequately with the problem. Moreover, his recent actions against the Bulgarians raised the possibility that they might cause him trouble in the Balkans while his forces were committed in the east. Nikephoros thus turned to diplomacy. He would relieve himself of the immediate Rus' threat by militarily playing them off against the Bulgarians, forcing the two to focus on a mutual conflict and so secure his Crimean and Balkan rear sectors for the unfolding strike against the Arabs.

Word of the Rus' threat in the Crimea was brought to Constantinople by Kalokyras, an individual well versed in steppe affairs. Nikephoros promoted him to patrician rank and sent him on a diplomatic mission to Svyatoslav aimed at convincing the Rus' prince to break off efforts against Kherson and undertake instead a raid in strength against Bulgaria. Kalokyras was given the large sum of 1500 lb of gold to serve as inducement for Svyatoslav accepting the arrangement.<sup>35</sup> Soon after dispatching his ambassador, Nikephoros set out for the east and Syria, confident that matters in Europe were well in hand. Events there did not transpire as intended.

With the money provided by Kalokyras, in 967 Svyatoslav raised an army of some 10,000–12,000 men, sailed from Kherson to the Danube's delta, and commenced ravaging the Bulgarian settlements in Dobrudzha.<sup>36</sup> It quickly became obvious that Svyatoslav's actions were geared toward conquest rather than raiding on behalf of Byzantine interests. Kalokyras, an ambitious man, had convinced him to attack Bulgaria in support of his own planned usurpation of the Byzantine throne. A threatening, permanent Rus' presence in the Balkans could be used as leverage in favor of the effort.<sup>37</sup> Surprised by the Rus' attack, Tsar

Petūr was caught with his troops concentrated in the south because of Nikephoros's recent demonstrations. By the time he transferred them northward, the Rus' had captured numerous Bulgarian towns and forts on the Danube's south bank in Dobrudzha. The hastily summoned Bulgarian force—said to have numbered 30,000 men—met Svyatoslav's warriors somewhere in Dobrudzha and suffered a resounding defeat. Driven from the field, the Bulgarians retired to Drüstūr and behind the Stone Dike, a line of fortifications spanning southern Dobrudzha, where they regrouped and took up defensive positions. Svyatoslav, who entertained little desire to assault manned ramparts with the small force at hand, turned to consolidating his hold over the territories abandoned by the Bulgarians north of their defense line.<sup>38</sup>

Despite checking the Rus' advance, the loss of Dobrudzha constituted a serious blow to the Bulgarian Empire. Dobrudzha represented a core heartland of the state. The lower Danube was crucial for the state's commercial economy, and the delta town of Pereyaslavets (Sl: "Little Preslav") was the leading regional entrepôt for commerce on the Black Sea coast. The river-oriented Rus' appreciated the economic benefits of the Danube. Svyatoslav was so impressed by the region's advantages that he took up residence in Pereyaslavets with the intention of making it his new state capital instead of Kiev.<sup>39</sup>

Tsar Petūr suffered a stroke sometime after his army's defeat and abdicated, retiring to a monastery near Preslav and leaving the state without a ruler.<sup>40</sup> Word of events in Bulgaria reached Emperor Nikephoros in Constantinople, who never intended that the Rus' should gain a permanent foothold in the Balkans, within close naval striking distance of Constantinople. He immediately recognized his strategic gaff and sought to correct his miscalculation as best he could. Whereas he previously had treated the Bulgarians with disdain, he now realized that their assistance was necessary to rectify the dangerous strategic situation without weakening his operations in the east. Before the close of 967 Petūr's two sons Boris and Roman were released from loose confinement as semi-hostages in Constantinople and permitted to return to Preslav, where the eldest—Boris—was elevated to the vacant throne as Tsar Boris II (967–971).<sup>41</sup>

In mid-968 a Bulgarian ambassador, charged with finalizing an accord with Nikephoros, was well received at the Great Palace in Constantinople, in stark contrast to the reception given Petūr's earlier embassy, and a treaty was struck.<sup>42</sup> Soon after, Nikephoros sent a delegation to the Pechenegs encouraging them to attack Svyatoslav's



Kievan homelands. The initiative succeeded. In July 968 a large horde of Pechenegs swept through Rus' holdings on the right bank of the Dnieper River and placed Kiev under siege. Svyatoslav's mother Olga, serving as regent, sent word to her son entreating him to return and rectify the situation. The Rus' ruler reluctantly heeded his mother's summons and decamped with most of his force. Before the year was out he relieved Kiev and drove the Pechenegs back onto the steppes, but winter set in and a return to the Balkans was put off until the following year. Meanwhile, the Bulgarians, taking advantage of the situation, advanced from their defenses, expelled the Rus' garrisons stationed in Pereyaslavets and other scattered locations, and reoccupied their lost heartland territories.<sup>43</sup>

With the advent of winter in late 968, the Bulgarian-Byzantine alliance seemed to have achieved its goal of expelling the Rus' from the Balkans, but appearances were deceiving. Both allies, assuming Svyatoslav's intervention in Bulgaria a longer-than-average raid, misread their enemy's motives and intentions. Neither fathomed that the Rus' prince had found the Danubian regions more attractive as state possessions than his own Kievan homelands. Rather than ending the Rus' threat, Svyatoslav's successful return to Kiev actually provided him with the opportunity to renew his Balkan efforts on a stronger basis. He spent the winter and spring of 969 solidifying administrative control over his Kievan possessions and enlisting a larger military force for a second Balkan campaign, winning to his service a number of Pecheneg tribes as cavalry auxiliaries augmenting his Rus' infantry.<sup>44</sup>

In 969 Bulgarian troops guarding the border along the lower Danube were unexpectedly confronted by Svyatoslav's reinforced Rus' army, whose first objective was Pereyaslavets. Most of Bulgaria's eastern forces were stationed in Dobrudzha and were hurriedly concentrated outside the town to meet the threat. Battle soon was joined, in which the Bulgarians initially seemed to enjoy the upper hand. They failed to turn that advantage decisively in their favor, however, and fighting dragged on throughout much of the day. Toward evening, a desperate Rus' assault broke the Bulgarian lines. The shock of the turnabout proved catastrophic for the Bulgarians. Their morale collapsed and the army disintegrated. Svyatoslav occupied the town and proceeded to overrun Dobrudzha without facing further serious resistance.<sup>45</sup>

The consequences of Pereyaslavets were disastrous for Bulgaria. The unexpectedness of the renewed Rus' incursion, and the total collapse

of Bulgarian forces in Dobrudzha, left no time to mobilize and transfer fresh troops from the western regions of the state to stem the rapid enemy advances in the east. With few organized forces available to man the walls, Drüstür and the Stone Dike no longer were serviceable bulwarks confining the enemy to Dobrudzha. Essentially unopposed, the Rus' flooded onto the Danubian Plain, directly threatening the stricken state's capital at Preslav. Bulgaria's dire situation was amplified because no immediate assistance could be expected from its Byzantine ally, whose troops were besieging Antioch in far off northern Syria. Tsar Boris was forced to seek a cessation of hostilities with Svyatoslav on whatever terms attainable.

The terms imposed by Svyatoslav transformed eastern Bulgaria into a Rus' satellite protectorate. Dobrudzha and the lower Danube were declared Rus' possessions and their important towns were occupied. The Danubian Plain, northern Thrace, and Bulgaria's western lands remained under Boris's nominal authority as Svyatoslav's dependent ally, who was constrained to accept a Rus' garrison in Preslav and obliged to furnish troops for the Rus' force. Boris retained his throne and capital at the cost of surrendering all independent governance. It was a shrewd arrangement. By outwardly respecting the pretense of the Bulgarian Empire's continued existence, Svyatoslav dampened potential opposition to his supreme authority among the eastern Bulgarian *bolyar* and warrior classes, whose cooperation as military reinforcements was needed to permit Svyatoslav to pursue his ambitions in the Balkans. Having gained Pereyaslavets and control of commercial traffic on the lower Danube, he sought to extend his sovereignty over as much of the eastern Balkans as possible, in hopes of reaping rich rewards if Kalokyras's coup plans succeeded or of extorting tribute from Byzantium if those efforts failed. By displaying outward deference to the Bulgarians' state pride, and by tapping their traditional anti-Byzantine sentiments, he sought to ensure their willing military aid in attaining his objectives.<sup>46</sup>

For well over a year Bulgarian warriors swelled the numbers of Svyatoslav's army and fought loyally in its ranks. That the Rus' spoke a Slavic tongue loosely related to their own probably assisted their willing participation. Not all *bolyari* and warriors, however, joined the Rus'. Few hailed from the rugged western Bulgarian lands—the Sofia Basin, Macedonia, and Albania—but that did not overly concern Svyatoslav. His primary interests lay in the open, populous, and lucrative eastern regions of Dobrudzha, the Danubian Plain, and Thrace, and he exhibited no

desire to waste time and resources on tackling the difficult western terrain to bring its regions' uncooperative inhabitants to heel. Such was not the case in Bulgaria's eastern territories. When the residents of Philippopolis resisted the newly imposed regime, Svyatoslav stormed the city and executed most of them in a stark demonstration of using terror tactics, if needed, to cement Bulgarian cooperation in regions he considered of vital interest.<sup>47</sup>

Beyond economic benefits, control of the lower Danube opened opportunities for expanding Rus' military capabilities. The river was a direct line of communication to Pannonia and its resident Magyar tribes. Aware of those warriors' reputation as fighters and mercenaries, Svyatoslav successfully enlisted some Magyar tribes as allied auxiliaries under his authority. When campaigning season opened in 970, and Svyatoslav commenced serious raiding activities against Byzantine thematic possessions in Thrace, the army he commanded included Rus', Bulgarian, Pecheneg, and Magyar contingents.<sup>48</sup>

While Svyatoslav cemented his hold over eastern Bulgaria, Emperor Nikephoros was assassinated in December 969 and succeeded by his nephew John I Tzimiskes (969–976). As had his predecessor, Tzimiskes agreed to reign as the protector and co-emperor of the youths Basil and Constantine, thus perpetuating the Macedonian dynasty in Byzantium. As a typical eastern magnate, Tzimiskes ascended the throne fixated on affairs with the Arabs in Syria. He initially viewed the Rus' presence in the Balkans as an inconvenience hampering military efforts in the east that could be treated effectively by standard diplomacy. A number of diplomatic exchanges between Svyatoslav and Tzimiskes occurred during early 970, in which the Rus' ruler received arms and cash from the emperor in the vain hope that he would vacate the Balkans in return. Instead, realizing that Kalokyras's coup plans were dashed by Tzimiskes's usurpation, Svyatoslav grew increasingly bombastic and insistent on rewards. By the end of spring a frustrated Tzimiskes terminated negotiations with the greedy Rus' prince.<sup>49</sup>

Svyatoslav turned to military action for pressing his objectives. In summer 970 he led his coalition army across the Balkan Mountains and into the empire's Thracian territories, which they systematically began plundering. His widespread raiding convinced Tzimiskes that the Rus' threat required a serious military response.<sup>50</sup> Affairs in Syria precluded transferring significant troops to the Balkans, but limited measures were possible. Tzimiskes created a new tagmatic unit, named the Immortals

(Gr: *Athanatoi*), and recruited 4000 experienced men to fill its ranks. He managed to gather a force of 10,000–12,000 Anatolian veterans and placed them under the command of the Domestic of the East Bardas Skleros. Those troops were transported to Thrace, where they advanced northward along the Diagonal highway and took positions around the Thracian thematic capital Arkadiopolis. To gain timely intelligence of the raiders' activities, daily mounted patrols, as well as bilingual spies dressed in Rus' or Bulgarian clothing, were dispatched into the countryside while the troops bivouacked near the city were kept combat-ready through rigorous training exercises.<sup>51</sup>

Svyatoslav detached a large body of troops, numbering some 30,000 Rus' and coalition partners, to drive off the Byzantine force at Arkadiopolis. As they approached, the Byzantine outpost details rapidly fell back on their main body's position. The outposts' hasty retreat in the face of overwhelming numbers was misread as a display of fear by Svyatoslav's troops, who encamped near the city expecting an easy victory. Anxious to inflict a crushing defeat on the invaders, but aware that his force was outnumbered, Skleros devised a cunningly effective battle plan.

When Skleros advanced against the enemy coalition force, his troops were divided into three contingents. One, comprised of 2000–3000 men, advanced and frontally attacked the first body of enemy encountered, which happened to be the Pechenegs. After a brief, violent engagement, Skleros orchestrated a masterful feigned retreat drawing both the Pechenegs and the nearby Magyars into a trap sprung by his other two divisions lying in ambush some distance to the rear. When the pursuers were led into a confined space between the hidden contingents, they were assaulted unexpectedly on both flanks. Disorganized and their horses winded by the headlong pursuit of Skleros's baiting units, the Pechenegs were routed, carrying with them the trailing Magyars. The fugitives' flight caused some disruption in the ranks of the Rus' and Bulgarians in the coalition's main body, who initially had taken position some distance to the rear of the Pechenegs and Magyars. When the now unified Byzantine army fell on them in the wake of their allies' rout, the combat was savage. Struck by highly coordinated cavalry and infantry blows inflicted by opponents possessing superior discipline and tactical skill, the Rus' and Bulgarian warriors put up a hard but futile fight before fleeing the field. Significant numbers of the fugitives were killed or captured by the pursuing Byzantines.<sup>52</sup>

The battle near Arkadiopolis was portrayed in Byzantine accounts as a decisive imperial victory, but other evidence suggests that Svyatoslav's men continued raiding the empire's Thracian territories following the engagement.<sup>53</sup> Soon after the battle Skleros and his troops were recalled to Anatolia to put down a rebellion by the Phokai and a number of their magnate allies.<sup>54</sup> Those operations consumed the remaining months of 970 before succeeding, during which time Byzantine Thrace lay open to Svyatoslav's marauders. The most important impact of Arkadiopolis was that, when the Pechenegs and Magyars headed home with their spoils at the close of campaigning season, they left with no intentions of returning the following year and possibly facing another Byzantine army in the field.

Preoccupied with the Anatolian uprising, Tzimiskes again resorted to diplomacy with Svyatoslav to secure his rear in the Balkans. Beyond arms and cash, the Rus' prince might have been convinced that Tzimiskes accepted his permanent hold on the northeastern Balkans. Whether such was the case can only be conjectured, but it is known that, when campaigning season ended in 970, Svyatoslav withdrew his Rus' and Bulgarian troops north of the Balkan Mountains, leaving the passes through them undefended.<sup>55</sup> His failure to implement basic border security measures would cost him dearly the next year and ultimately prove catastrophic for Bulgaria.

In an effort to rejuvenate offensive capabilities in Syria, during late 970 Tzimiskes thoroughly reorganized the armies in the east.<sup>56</sup> The measure permitted him to concentrate in southern Thrace a force of 32,000–40,000 men for use against Svyatoslav's Rus' and Bulgarians. In Constantinople, the imperial fleet was expanded to 300 ships and readied for service on the Danube, to block Rus' escape attempts once operations commenced. While Tzimiskes negotiated with Svyatoslav during the winter, the land and sea forces underwent continuous training exercises, and Adrianople was transformed into a large military depot stockpiling abundant supplies in preparation for the looming offensive. By the end of March 971, all was ready.<sup>57</sup>

With the onset of Christian Holy Week in April, Tzimiskes commenced his offensive to crush the Rus' forces and expel them completely from the Balkans. He personally led a 9000-man vanguard rapidly into the Balkan Mountains, by way of the Vürbitsa Pass, and ordered the imperial fleet to embark for the Danube to block its mouth at the delta. His first objective was Preslav, the Bulgarian capital, where a significant

Rus' garrison was stationed. By swiftly defeating its defenders and capturing the city, he hoped to deliver a telling blow to the Rus' at the outset of hostilities that would throw them off balance while the Bulgarians might be persuaded to renounce their Rus' allegiance and abandon active resistance. Within days of the Byzantines crossing the mountains and debouching onto the lowlands near Preslav, Tzimiskes's initial hopes were fulfilled.

Tzimiskes's vanguard encamped in the Gerlovo Basin (where Nikephoros I had met his doom 160 years earlier) on the evening of 11 April after traversing the Balkan Mountains undetected by the enemy. At dawn the next day, Holy Thursday, he led his men through the Preslav Mountains defile and onto the plain leading to Preslav, arrayed in battle formation, with drums beating, trumpets sounding, and men cheering. The city garrison, commanded by the Rus' leader Svenkel (or: Sveinald, Sphengelos, Svyatold), was taken aback by the surprise appearance of the battle-ready Byzantines but they hastily rushed out of the city and formed ranks to meet the oncoming foe. Serious combat erupted on the flatlands immediately north of Preslav's walled perimeter. For a while the two sides were evenly matched in a deadly infantry fight until Tzimiskes ordered his mounted Immortals to penetrate the enemy's left wing, which, if successful, would place them between the Rus' and Bulgarians and Preslav's protective walls. The Immortals' assault broke their opponents' flank, forcing them to turn and race for the city's fortifications to escape encirclement. Many of the defeated enemy were cut off by the mounted tagmatic troopers and either killed or captured. By evening Tzimiskes controlled the body-strewn field and the Rus' and Bulgarians were holed up behind Preslav's outer defenses.

As dawn broke on 13 April, Christian Good Friday, the main body of Tzimiskes's army arrived outside Preslav, bringing with it the baggage train and assorted siege equipment. The emperor quickly ranged his troops around the circuit of the city's outer walls, but concentrated their main strength on the north, where the level ground was more amenable to infantry operations and the placement of siege engines. On completing his dispositions, Tzimiskes ordered a concerted assault on the defenses by his infantry and siege machines. A relentless barrage of missiles was unleashed from bows and the siege artillery, forcing most of the defenders manning the ramparts to seek protection behind their stone battlements. Under the cover provided by the missile attack, infantry raised scaling ladders against the walls and pounded the city's north

portal with battering rams. They soon secured a lodgment on the parapets and drove off their defenders while the gate was broken open, permitting the Byzantine main body to pour into Preslav's "outer city."

The Byzantines swept through the rich commercial and populous residential quarters, killing, looting, and taking numerous Bulgarian captives. Among the latter were Tsar Boris and his wife and children, bedecked in their imperial raiment. They had fled the palace in the "inner city" when it became obvious that Svenkel intended to use that fortified quarter as a citadel for staging a last stand against the Byzantine onslaught. Their dress demonstrated that Boris, in defecting from the Rus' cause, sought that they be recognized and taken into honorable custody by the attackers. He and his family were brought before Tzimiskes, who treated them with the respect due their imperial station. He assured them that his military actions were aimed at avenging the insults and depredations inflicted by Svyatoslav on the Bulgarians, and that he had come as a liberator rather than a conqueror. Tzimiskes then proclaimed that all Bulgarian captives were to be freed, that Boris and his family were his guests, and that the Bulgarians were to be considered allies. Most likely Tzimiskes sincerely meant what he said at the meeting, but by the end of the campaign in July he came to espouse a different take on Balkan political realities. In the meantime, the last resistance of the enemy garrison needed addressing.

Svenkel, with his surviving Rus' followers and a contingent of anti-Byzantine Bulgarian diehards, hunkered down within the walls of the "inner city" palace district. The Byzantines' attempts to storm the position proved costly and ineffective, despite Tzimiskes's personal efforts to spur on his troops. He finally ordered archers to set fire to the structures inside the walls with flaming arrows. Once a conflagration took hold, the Byzantines forced their way into the citadel through an open gate and were met in the palace's courtyard by the defenders arrayed in battle formation. Bardas Skleros and his veterans were ordered to crush their resistance and more heavy fighting ensued. Amid a hail of arrows, Skleros's men prevailed but Svenkel and a small band of Rus' managed to fight their way out of the city and flee northward to rejoin Svyatoslav and the main Rus' army in Drüstür. During the following days, Tzimiskes rested and rewarded his victorious troops, celebrated Easter in the Bulgarian capital, repaired the damage to its walls and "inner city," gathered intelligence on the Rus' force, renamed the captured city Ioannoupolis in honor of his victory, and installed a garrison to hold the

place before he advanced northward in search of a decisive engagement with the Rus'.<sup>58</sup>

The fall of Preslav ended concerted eastern Bulgarian collaboration with the Rus'. As Tzimiskes marched across the Danubian Plain toward Drüstür, where the Kievan prince was ensconced, the majority of Bulgarian garrisons in the towns and forts along his path opened their gates to him on terms and without resistance. The minority of those who did not found themselves overwhelmed and their stations sacked. So widespread were Bulgarian defections that Svyatoslav, desperate to preserve Bulgarian reinforcement for his limited Rus' force, rounded up the *bolyari* in Drüstür and other Danubian centers under his control, threw them into chains, and ordered 300 of them executed as reprisal for desertions from his cause. The latter act enjoyed only a limited effect. Although it can be hypothesized that some Bulgarians remained loyal to Svyatoslav to the bitter end of the campaign out of deep seated animosity toward the Byzantines, most ceased active opposition to Tzimiskes's imperial forces by the time the Rus' were expelled completely from the Balkans in July 971.<sup>59</sup>

By early May Tzimiskes had Svyatoslav and his Rus' bottled in the Danubian fortress of Drüstür, caught between the Byzantine army by land and the imperial fleet by water. An epic three-month siege ensued, during which Tzimiskes was unable to overcome the fortress's ramparts while Svyatoslav, fearful of the Byzantine ships armed with Greek fire, staged four unsuccessful pitched battles outside the city's walls in attempts to break the Byzantine vice. So intense was the fighting in the last of those engagements, fought on 24 July by desperate Rus' warriors facing starvation and military humiliation, that Tzimiskes, and the Byzantine accounts, credited ultimate success in repulsing them to a divine windstorm and the direct intervention of the popular Christian military saint, Theodore Stratelates.

The following day, 25 July, Svyatoslav proposed terms for terminating the conflict. Tzimiskes, concerned that the siege might drag on with no immediate end, accepted. According to the resulting treaty, Svyatoslav yielded Drüstür undamaged and surrendered his prisoners to Tzimiskes. He agreed to evacuate the Balkans permanently, cease all threats in the Crimea, and swore to live in peace with the empire. In return, Tzimiskes permitted the Rus' to depart the Balkans unhindered, provided them with rations for their journey home, asked the Pechenegs to refrain from obstructing their way to Kiev, and guaranteed their continued economic



relationships with Byzantium, as defined by past agreements. After a brief personal meeting of the two rulers on the Danube's banks, Svyatoslav sailed away with the remnants of his army, some loyal Bulgarians, and his loot. He never reached Kiev. While portaging the Dnieper River cataracts the following spring (972), the Rus' were attacked by the Pechenegs. Svyatoslav was killed and his corpse suffered a fate similar to Nikephoros I's after Vürbitsa: The Pechenegs turned his skull into a drinking cup.<sup>60</sup>

By the time Svyatoslav evacuated the Balkans, Tzimiskes's views regarding Bulgaria had changed drastically since his meeting with Boris in Preslav. He came to realize that all of Bulgaria's eastern territories had fallen under his control. The Bulgarian imperial family was in his custody. Svyatoslav's deadly reprisals in Drüstūr had decimated the eastern *bolyari* while their warrior followers had laid down their arms and accepted the Byzantines' seizure of their strongholds. Their only use to Tzimiskes during the campaign had been the advantage gained by weakening the Rus' through their defections. Thus ultimate military victory was due solely to Byzantine troops under his command, and the Bulgarians' passive role was considered secondary. Tzimiskes initially intended the campaign to solidify his hold on power by winning a triumph over the Rus' in the Balkans. He now possessed the opportunity to magnify that victory's import by doubling the triumph. He had crushed the Rus' threat in the Balkans while, more significantly, laying low Bulgaria, Byzantium's perennial Balkan hegemonic competitor, extending Byzantine control to the lower Danube for the first time in three centuries.

In the aftermath of the campaign, Tzimiskes staged a triumphal entry into Constantinople intended to cement an aura of divine favor for his unprecedented victory. Significantly, all the symbolic elements associated with the event alluded to triumph over the Bulgarians rather than the Rus'. No matter that the enemy involved, from beginning to end, had been Svyatoslav and his Kievan warriors, the fact that Bulgaria apparently had fallen during the fighting constituted the Byzantines' signal achievement. In their eyes, God had settled the two Orthodox empires' earthly competition in their favor, and Tzimiskes had been His chosen instrument.

On the day of the triumph, Tzimiskes mustered his army, Boris and his entire family, and the plunder from the campaign in the fields outside Constantinople's Golden Gate. He was officially welcomed before that portal by a patrician and clerical delegation, which presented him with a golden wagon drawn by white horses. Tzimiskes ordered placed

on it an icon of the Virgin taken from the Bulgarian palace at Preslav and the Bulgarian emperor's imperial crowns. In a blatant act of public humility, Tzimiskes placed himself behind the wagon with its sacred icon and, followed by Boris and the rest of the procession's participants, passed through the Golden Gate into the city. The Mese (main boulevard) along which they progressed was lined with cheering onlookers and bedecked with festive decorations. On reaching the Forum of Constantine, Tzimiskes was publically acclaimed and thanksgiving hymns sung to the Virgin Mary, after which Boris was ritualistically divested of his imperial insignia. The triumph concluded with a religious service in Hagia Sophia, during which Tzimiskes symbolically dedicated the Bulgarian imperial crowns to God and placed them on the altar. Later, at ceremonies held in the Great Palace, Boris was invested with the title of *magistros* and admitted into the highest ranks of Byzantium's patrician elite. His younger brother Roman was not so fortunate: Tzimiskes had the son-less prince castrated and rendered a eunuch, thus effectively ending the Bulgarian imperial dynasty for posterity.<sup>61</sup>

Byzantine administrative and military authority was swiftly imposed on Bulgaria's eastern territories by the introduction of three new themes centered on their most important cities—Preslav, Drüstür, and Pereyaslavets—and the installation of commanders to head them. Forts were erected along the lower Danube's south bank and on strategically located islands in the river while the new theme of "Mesopotamia of the West" (centered on Pereyaslavets) may have included a river fleet as part of its thematic force. Most details for the new organization in the eastern Bulgarian lands remain obscure because of the nature of the extant sources. The paucity of documentation, and the chronological opaqueness of information provided by surviving seals, has resulted in much scholarly hypothetical debate regarding the situation in the eastern lands following their annexation. It appears that the administration was established primarily to defend against a possible renewed Rus' assault and that native Bulgarians were integrated into the thematic defense forces.<sup>62</sup>

Having been divested of its capital, its ruling dynasty, and control of its eastern Balkan holdings, Bulgaria was stripped of its last official vestige of imperial status when Tzimiskes proclaimed the autocephalous Bulgarian patriarchate ended. Its new primate, relocated to Preslav, was reduced in status to a metropolitan and its ecclesiastical jurisdictions placed under the supreme authority of Constantinople's patriarch.<sup>63</sup>

Given all that transpired in 971, the Byzantines assumed that Bulgaria had ceased to exist as a competitor and state. They failed to take into account, however, one crucially important human factor that negated their assumption—the inhabitants of Bulgaria’s western territories. Protected by the mountainous terrain of the Sofia Basin, Macedonia, and Albania, the western Bulgarians were left largely untouched by the Rus’ invasions and Byzantium’s military operations. Neither Svyatoslav nor Tzimiskes made concerted efforts to exert direct authority over them, and no evidence exists for Rus’ or Byzantine military activity in their lands between 967 and 971. Thus western Bulgaria remained free and intact, and its leadership and warriors displayed no inclination to accept Byzantine claims of conquest in their portion of the Bulgarian Empire. Within five years of eastern Bulgaria’s fall, a group of western *bolyari* reasserted Bulgaria’s imperial claims and succeeded in preserving the empire for another 42 years.

## NOTES

1. Theo. Cont., 135; Skylitzes, 215. For Petür, see: Andreev, 73–79; P. Koledarov, “Tsar Petür I,” *VISb*, no. 4 (1982): 192–207.
2. The *bolyari*’s fears were not groundless. In his *DAI*, Constantine Porphyrogenetos stressed the strategic advantages provided Byzantium by the Magyars, Pechenegs, Croats, and Serbs in relations with the Bulgarians. For a discussion of *DAI* in this regard, see Stephenson, *Byzantium’s Balkan Frontier*, 25f.
3. Skylitzes, 215; Leo the Grammarian, 166–167; Treadgold, *A History*, 479.
4. Treadgold, *ibid.*
5. Theo. Cont., 135–36; Skylitzes, *op. cit.*; *Vita Mariae Junioris*, 80. That Romanos did not call on the Magyars or the Pechenegs to intervene indicates the rumors circulating about Byzantine diplomatic activity among them were greatly exaggerated.
6. Constantine Porphyrogenetos, *The Book of Ceremonies* 2, 682, 690; *DAI*, chap. 13; Liudprand of Cremona, *The Embassy of ... (Relatio de Legatione Constantinopolitana)* (hereafter, *Embassy*), in *The Complete Works*, 250–251; *id.*, *Retribution*, 129; Leo the Deacon, 109–110; the *Du Cange Catalog* (Paris MS), entry, *Notitia archiepiscopi Ioannis Comneni*, V. Tüpkova-Zaimova, trans., in *GIBI* 7, 109.
7. Theo. Cont., 136; Skylitzes, 215–216; J. Shepard, “A Marriage Too Far? Maria Lekapena and Peter of Bulgaria,” in *The Empress Theophano*.

- Byzantium and the West at the Turn of the First Millennium*, A. Davids, ed. (Cambridge, 1995), 121–149; Iv. Duichev, “On the Treaty of 927 with the Bulgarians,” *DOP* 32 (1978 [1980]): 219–295; Jenkins, “The Peace with Bulgaria.”
8. Shepard, *ibid.*, 131; Z. Stanimir, “Dogovorūt ot 927 godina mezhdu Bŭlgariya i Vizantiya,” *Istoriya* 23, no. 3 (2015): 264–77; *NCMH* 3, 579; Whittow, 292; and Stephenson, *Byzantium’s Balkan Frontier*, 24.
  9. Iv. Biliarski, “St. Peter (927–969), Tsar of the Bulgarians,” in *State and Church: Studies in Medieval Bulgaria and Byzantium*, 173–188.
  10. Zlatarski, *IBDSV* 1/2, pt. III, chap. 2; Mutafchiev, *IBN* 1, chap. X, sect. 2; Runciman, *Romanus Lecapenus*, 102–103; *id.*, *A History*, 183–184; Browning, *ibid.*, 67–69.
  11. As Fine (*Early Medieval Balkans*, 163–164) aptly stated: “... evidence does not exist to support the bleak view universally presented in scholarship about Peter [and his state]... Peter has been one of the most maligned figures in Bulgarian history. But unlike some other historical figures depicted as incompetent, behind whose condemnation lie various sources, Peter has been unanimously denigrated without a single source speaking against him.”
  12. Fine, “A Fresh Look,” 88–89; T. Todorov, “Voennite kampanii na tsar Simeon (893–927) i problemūt za iztoshtavaneto na Bŭlgariya (opit za istoriko-statisticheski analiz),” in *Nauchni izsledvaniya v chest na professor Ivan Karaiotov*, 317–325.
  13. Stephenson, *Byzantium’s Balkan Frontier*, 41; Whittow, 293–294.
  14. *RPC*, 72–73.
  15. Fine, “A Fresh Look,” 91, 93; *id.*, *Early Medieval Balkans*, 169–170. Historians studying pre-modern times have long assumed that chronic warfare between states automatically led to ruinous commercial disruption, a perception that fed the portrayal of Petŭr’s Bulgaria as economically and financially exhausted. Recent studies in pre-modern economic history have demonstrated that such generally was not the case: “... in the ancient and medieval context, chronic or permanent military conflicts never entirely stopped commercial exchange.” (A.E. Laiou and C. Morriison, *The Byzantine Economy* [Cambridge, 2007], 35.)
  16. *Theo. Cont.*, 135; Skylitzes, 218.
  17. Fine, “A Fresh Look,” 91; *id.*, *Early Medieval Balkans*, 162–163.
  18. *DAI*, chap. 32; Ćirković, 18–19; Ostrogorsky, *History*, 267–268, 268 n.
  19. The subject of Bogomilism is large and complex and our study’s summary of it is brief. For detailed examinations, see: D. Angelov, *Bogomilstvoto v Bŭlgariya*, 3rd. ed. (Sofia, 1969); I. Ivanov, *Bogomilski knigi i legendi* (Sofia, 1925); D. Obolensky, *The Bogomils: A Study in Balkan Neo-Manichaeism* (Cambridge, 1948); *id.*, *Byzantine Commonwealth*, 121f;

- S. Runciman, *The Medieval Manichee; A Study of the Christian Dualist Heresy* (Cambridge 1947); Fine, *Early Medieval Balkans*, 171f; Hussey, *The Orthodox Church*, chap. VI, sect. 5.
20. There exist only four primary sources for early Bogomilism in Bulgaria: Theophylaktos (Patriarch of Constantinople), *Letter to Tsar Petŭr* (ca., 940), in *GIBI* 5, 183–189; *The Secret Book of the Bogomils* (tenth century), in *Voices*, 83–89; Kosmas Presbyter, *Sermon Against the Bogomils*, in *Voices*, 68–83; and the *Synodikon of Tsar Boril* (1211), in *Voices*, 249–255.
  21. Kosmas, 75.
  22. J.V.A. Fine, Jr., *The Bosnian Church: A New Interpretation. A Study of the Bosnian Church and Its Place in State and Society from the 13th to the 15th Centuries* (Boulder, CO, 1975), chap. One; id., *Early Medieval Balkans*, 171–172; id., “A Fresh Look,” 91–93.
  23. J.V.A. Fine, Jr., “The Size and Significance of the Bulgarian Bogomil Movement,” *EEQ* 11, no. 4 (Winter, 1977): 385–412; id., *Early Medieval Balkans*, 178–179; Ostrogorsky, *History*, chap. IV., sect. 4; Treadgold, *A History*, 544–547; Jenkins, *Imperial Centuries*, 247f; Mango, *Empire of New Rome*, 50f.
  24. Ibrahim ibn Yakub, *Relatio ... de Itinere Slavico, quae traditur apud Al-Bekri*, T. Kowalski, ed. *Monumenta Poloniae Historica*, n.s. 1. (Cracow, 1946), 148; *RPC*, 86 (Prince Svyatoslav); and V. Zlatarski, *Izbrani proizvedeniya* 2, P. Petrov, ed. (Sofia, 1984), 70–88.
  25. *IB* 2, pt. IV, chaps. 4, sects. 1–2; Gerasimov, “Olovni pechati na bŭlgarskite tsare Simeon i Petŭr,” *IBAI* 12, (1938): 354–364; D. Aladzhev, “Kreposti i selishta v Yugoiztochna Bŭlgariya po vreme na Pŭrvata bŭlgarska dŭrzhava,” in *Arhitekturata na Pŭrvata i Vtorata bŭlgarska dŭrzhava. Materiali*, G. Kozhuharov, ed., (Sofia, 1975), 121–133; N. Mavrodinov, *Starobŭlgarskoto izkustvo (Izkustvoto na Pŭrvoto bŭlgarsko tsarstvo)* (Sofia, 1959), 184f, 277f; Vaklinov, 233–234; A. W. Epstein, “Middle Byzantine Churches of Kastoria,” *The Art Bulletin* 57 (1980): 190–207; *NCMH* 3, 580–581; Shepard, “A Marriage,” 141n; Whittow, 292–293; Curta, *Southeastern Europe*, 228–229.
  26. Whittow, 292, and Curta, *ibid.*, 236. For Byzantine wariness of Petŭr’s Bulgaria, see: *NCMH* 3, 579–580; G. Bakalov, “Tsarskata promulgatsiya na Petŭr i negovite priemnitni v svetlinata na bŭlgaro-vizantiiskite diplomaticheski otnosheniya sled dogovora ot 927 g.,” *IPr* 39, no. 6 (1983): 35–44.
  27. Zlatarski, *IBDSV* 1/2, 544, for Maria’s death.
  28. For Nikephoros and his character, see: G. Schlumberger’s *Un empereur byzantin au dixième siècle. Nicéphore Phocas* (Paris, 1890 [Reprint ed., Paris, 1923]); R. Morris, “The Two Faces of Nikephoros Phokas,” *BMGS* 12 (1988): 83–115; E. Turdeanu, *Le dit de l’empereur Nicéphore II Phocas et son épouse Théophano* (Thessaloniki, 1976).

29. Skylitzes, 246. Skylitzes's seemingly chronological portrayals frequently did not reflect the actual timeline of events because he tended to telescope them to fit essentially thematic frameworks, and this might have characterized his note concerning Petūr's negotiations in 963. For problems of chronological accuracy in Skylitzes, see C. Holmes, *Basil II and the Governance of Empire (976–1025)* (Oxford, 2005), 102–103.
30. A.D. Stokes, "The Balkan Campaigns of Svjatoslav Igorevich," *SEER* 40, no. 95 (1962): 57.
31. Leo the Deacon, 109–110.
32. Zonaras, 179; Skylitzes, 265; Liudprand, *Embassy*, 266.
33. Leo the Deacon, 111; Skylitzes, *ibid.*; Zonaras, *ibid.*; P. Tivchev, "Za voinata mezhdū Vizantiya i Bŭlgariya prez 967 g.," *IPr* 25, no. 4 (1969): 80–88. Our study (along with many recent accounts) accepts the chronology for these and subsequent Kievan Rus' events advanced by A.D. Stokes, "The Background and Chronology of the Balkan Campaigns of Svjatoslav," *SEER* 40, no. 94 (1961): 43–57.
34. *RPC*, 84f; Franklin and Shepard, 142f; Vernadsky, *Kievan Russia*, chap. II, pt. 5.
35. Leo the Deacon, 111–112; Skylitzes, 265; Stokes, "The Balkan Campaigns," 467f.
36. For the size of Svyatoslav's army, see Hanak, 141 n.
37. Leo the Deacon, 128; Skylitzes, 275.
38. *RPC*, 84–85; Leo the Deacon, 128–129; Skylitzes, 265–266; Curta, *Southeastern Europe*, 229–230.
39. *RPC*, 86; Skylitzes, 275; Franklin and Shepard, 145–146; N. Oikonomides, "Prethlavitza, the Little Preslav," *Sf* 42 (1983): 1–9; S. Baraschi and O. Damian, "Considérations sur la céramique émaillée de Nufăru," *Dacia* 37 (1993): 237–277; Stephenson, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier*, 56–57, and 57 n.
40. Leo the Deacon, 129; Zlatarski, *IBDSV* 1/2, 561–562; Mutafchiev, *IBN* 1, 272; Stokes, "The Balkan Campaigns," 477–478 and nn; Ivanov, *Bŭlgarski starini iz Makedoniya*, 383f.
41. For Boris II, see Andreev, 80–81.
42. Liudprand, *Embassy*, 250–251; Leo the Deacon, 130–131 and nn.
43. *RPC*, 85–86.
44. *Ibid.*, 87.
45. *Ibid.* It appears that, in broadly analogous terms, the Bulgarians "met their Waterloo" in the engagement.
46. Skylitzes, 275; Bozhilov and Gyuzelev, 297–298; Zlatarski, *IBDSV* 1/2, 571–573; Mutafchiev, *IBN* 1, 272–273; Fine, *Early Medieval Balkans*, 184–186; Curta, *Southeastern Europe*, 239.
47. Leo the Deacon, 155.

48. *Ibid.*, 158; Skylitzes, 275–276.
49. *RPC*, 87–88; Leo the Deacon, 153, 155–157; Skylitzes, 275.
50. Iv. Iordanov, “Voinata mezhdur Vizantiya i Rusiya v Bŭlgariya (970–971). Prosopografiya na uchastnitsite,” in *Bŭlgariya v svetovnoto kulturno nasledstvo*, 311–320.
51. Leo the Deacon, 157–159; Skylitzes, 276; Treadgold, *Byzantium and Its Army*, 79.
52. Leo the Deacon, 158–160; Skylitzes, 275–278; Zonaras, 180–181; Angelov and Cholpanov, 15–18; *BVIF*, 185–187; Haldon, *The Byzantine Wars*, 98; McGeer, *Sowing the Dragon’s Teeth*, 294, 298–299.
53. *RPC*, 88; Leo the Deacon, 173–174; Stokes, “The Balkan Campaigns,” 492–493 and nn; M. Drinov, *Yuzhnite slavyani i Vizantiya prez X vek* (Sofia, 1930 [orig. ed., Moscow, 1876]), 89.
54. Treadgold, *A History*, 508; Ostrogorsky, *History*, 294.
55. *RPC*, 88–89; Leo the Deacon, 177–178; Stokes, *op. cit.*, 493; Franklin and Shepard, 148.
56. Treadgold, *Byzantium and Its Army*, 35–36.
57. Leo the Deacon, 160, 173, 174, 176, 179; Skylitzes, 281, 282; Treadgold, *A History*, 509 and n. Angelov and Cholpanov, 19–21, gave the total land force as 40,000–45,000 men.
58. Leo the Deacon, 179–183; Skylitzes, 282–284; Zonaras, 181–182.
59. Leo the Deacon, 184; Skylitzes, 284, 286, 287. Angelov and Cholpanov, 25–26, made the case for continued Bulgarian adherence to the Rus’ alliance.
60. Leo the Deacon, 184–186, 187–189, 192–193, 194–200; Skylitzes, 285–288, 289–294; *RPC*, 89–90; S. McGrath, “The Battles of Dorostolon (971): Rhetoric and Reality,” in *Peace and War in Byzantium: Essays in Honor of George T. Dennis, S.J.*, T.S. Miller and J. Nesbitt, eds. (Washington, DC, 1995): 152–164.
61. Leo the Deacon, 200–201; Skylitzes, 294; McCormick, 171f.
62. *Escorial Taktikon*, in N. Oikonomides, ed., *Les listes de préséance byzantines des IXe-Xe siècles* (Paris, 1972), 255–277; V. Tŭpkova-Zaimova, *Dolni Dunav—Granichna zona na vizantiiskiia zapad. Kŭm istoriyata na severni i severiztochni bŭlgarski zemi, kraya na X–XII v.* (Sofia, 1976), chap. II, esp. 34–51; Iv. Bozhilov, “Anonimŭt na Haze.” *Bŭlgariya i Vizantiya na dolni Dunav v kraya na X vek* (Sofia, 1979), 120f; Treadgold, *Byzantium and Its Army*, 36 and n.
63. Ivanov, *Bŭlgarski starini iz Makedoniya*, 566; I. Iordanov, *Pechatite ot strategiyata v Preslav (971–1088)* (Sofia, 1993), 187; Bozhilov and Gyuzelev, 311; Zlatarski, *IBDSV* 1/2, 597; Mutafchiev, *IBN* 1, 276–277; Runciman, *A History*, 215–216; Stephenson, *Byzantium’s Balkan Frontier*, 58.

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## Samuil's Campaigns to Preserve Bulgaria and Bulgarian Defeat, 976–1018

The historical record of Bulgaria's western territories between the early 960s and the death of Emperor Tzimiskes in January 976 is extremely murky. Few primary sources treat those regions during that time. From 966 through 971 Byzantine attention was focused on events transpiring in eastern Bulgaria, and after 971, when Tzimiskes turned his attention

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The following works provided the basic informational framework for the text of this chapter treating the final phase of the Bulgarian-Byzantine hegemonic wars: Bozhilov and Gyuzelev, pt. 3, chap. 6; Zlatarski, *IBDSV* 1/2, 562–566, pt. VI; Mutafchiev, *IBN* 1, chap. XII; *IB* 2, pt. IV, chap. 3; Andreev, 82–93; *IB* 5 VI, 96–103; Angelov and Cholpanov, 32–61; Tzvetkov, 141–147; A.P. Dimitrov, *Zapadno bulgarsko tsarstvo* (Sofia, 1930); S.G. Kashev, *Voinite na tsar Samuil i negovite priemnitsi* (Sofia, 1933); D. Radulov, "Tsar Samuil," *VISb*, no. 2 (1982): 188–197; A. Nicoloff, *Samuel's Bulgaria* (Cleveland, OH, 1969); S. Antoljak, *Samuel and His State*, E. Frankel and Z. Anchevski, trans. (Skopje, 1985); S. Pirivatrić, *Samuilova država. Obim i karakter* (Belgrade, 1997); Runciman, *A History*, bk. III, chap. III; Browning, *Byzantium and Bulgaria*, 73–75; Fine, *Early Medieval Balkans*, 188–200; Curta, *Southeastern Europe*, 241–247 and *passim*; *NCMH* 3, 595–601; Obolensky, *Byzantine Commonwealth*, 130–133; Stephenson, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier*, 58–79; id., *The Legend of Basil the Bulgar-Slayer* (Cambridge, 2003), chaps. 2–3; Whittow, 296–298, 369, 376, 386–389; Treadgold, *A History*, 510, 513–528; Ostrogorsky, *History*, chap. IV, sect. 6; G. Schlumberger, *Tsar Samuil i Vasilii II* (Sofia, 1943); Jenkins, *Imperial Centuries*, chaps. 22–23.



back to the east, developments in Bulgaria's western lands not blatantly posing immediate threats were ignored as inconsequential. There exists no extant contemporary Bulgarian evidence for the period. Much like the approach taken by past historians toward Tsar Petŭr's reign, compensation for the paucity of sources for events in Bulgaria's western possessions has been found in advancing hypotheses presented as facts, some of which have become engrained in modern interpretations.

One such hypothesis, based on the supposition that Petŭr was Byzantium's lackey, holds that the *bolyari* in the western lands rebelled against the pro-Byzantine *tsar* in 963 and established an independent state of Western Bulgaria centered on geographical Macedonia.<sup>1</sup> This theory has almost no serious proponents today. Another claims that the western Bulgarian leadership broke with Boris II during 968 or 969, after he was installed as a Byzantine puppet *tsar*.<sup>2</sup> Whether this supposed revolt established a separate Western Bulgarian state or simply rejected Rus' and Byzantine claims of authority over Bulgaria by preserving the state's independent continuity in its western territories has been debated. A third postulate states that there were no western Bulgarian uprisings against either Petŭr or Boris and that Tzimiskes technically conquered all of Bulgaria in 971, after which he imposed Byzantine administration by creating six new themes encompassing Bulgaria's eastern lands and fringe portions of its western possessions before his death. This hypothesis has been accepted, either whole or in part, in the most recent scholarship. That there were no western Bulgarian revolts during the period appears most likely but whether Byzantine administration was imposed anywhere in Bulgaria's western holdings remains uncertain.<sup>3</sup>

A reasonable hypothesis regarding the situation in the western Bulgarian lands during the 960s and early 970s can be grounded in the apparent structure of Bulgarian provincial administration. Extant Bulgarian evidence for the matter is spotty. Most sources for early medieval Bulgaria were Byzantine products possessing limited knowledge of the state's internal workings. Those that displayed a better-than-average grasp of Bulgarian domestic realities portrayed them in Byzantine terms for Byzantine audiences, which may have distorted the state of affairs actually holding in Bulgaria.

By the late ninth century Bulgaria undoubtedly was a "typical" early medieval European state, ruled by a monarch governing through an elite nobility. Details of the administrative structure and how it functioned are unclear because sources are sparse. Given the state of communications

during the medieval period, geography and distance limited the effectiveness of the ruler's direct authority over the nobility to regions immediately surrounding his court's location at any given time, accounting for the migratory policy of many European monarchs within their domains. To exert authority through nobles overseeing regions farther removed from the court, the ruler depended on either imposing his own representatives over them or their sustained loyalty to his person. In the latter instance, the monarch attempted to cement the nobility's allegiance by the bestowal of privileges, titles, and largess, hopefully reinforced by established state tradition. In cases where such inducements failed and provincial nobles acted against the ruler's interests, his primary recourse was to impose authority by force exerted through those noble peers remaining loyal to the crown.

It is generally accepted that early medieval Bulgaria enjoyed an exceptionally strong and effective tradition of dynastic and state loyalty among its nobles. With the lone exception of the divisive *boili* in-fighting that characterized the second half of the eighth century, Bulgaria was ruled by members of only two dynasties between its founding in 681 and Tzimiskes's conquests in 971—those of the Dulos and Krum. Evidence exists for few noble revolts against the rulers' central authority—one against Boris and the Christian conversions in 866 and two against Petūr in the late 920s. Omurtag's creation of a strong service nobility in the ninth century played an important role in that success, but details of his administration generally are lacking. No extant evidence demonstrates that Bulgarian rulers adopted a migratory policy for exerting their domestic authority, and all signs indicate that they continuously governed from a recognized capital. Perhaps the monarchs imposed provincial representatives closely tied to themselves and their central authority, as Krum's organization for his northern Thracian possessions in 812 and Omurtag's imposition of regional governors on conquered Croatian lands during his 827 anti-Frank campaign may indicate. The distribution of royal largess among the nobility was documented for Omurtag and Malamir and assumedly held for all Bulgarian rulers, who, perhaps with the exception of Petūr, also provided their noble warriors with ample opportunities to acquire social status and material benefits through active military service. Following Bulgaria's conversion to Christianity, the Orthodox model of the ruler representing God's earthly viceroy governing a divinely ordained Christian realm reinforced the nobility's deep seated tradition of loyalty to their ruler and state.<sup>4</sup>

The Rus' and Byzantine incursions into Bulgaria's eastern territories during the late 960s and early 970s left the western regions largely untouched. No documented Rus' or Byzantine military or political activity in those districts exists, although both could have made unrecorded efforts. After proclaiming his "conquest" of the Bulgarian Empire, the thematic structure imposed by Tzimiskes encompassed only the eastern, fringes of the southwestern, and possibly portions of the northwestern holdings of the state. Most of Bulgaria's possessions in Macedonia, Albania, and the Sofia Basin lay outside that organization and constituted roughly half of the former empire's territory and population. With such a large portion of Bulgaria remaining beyond direct Byzantine authority, the Bulgarians inhabiting that territory were left independent and the continuity of Bulgarian provincial administration (whatever that may have been) was maintained.

An exceptional tradition of state loyalty among the western Bulgarian *bolyari*, combined with their deeply engrained anti-Byzantine sentiments, apparently led those nobles to reject their rivals' claim of Bulgarian conquest and to preserve Bulgaria's administrative structure in regions they controlled until legitimate native rule could be restored and all lost lands reclaimed. This approach initially did not involve active opposition to the Byzantines in those districts where thematic structures were imposed. Time was needed to forge a workable interim authority structure acceptable to the nobles and effective in attaining their strategic objectives. The absence of a Byzantine presence in territories under the western *bolyari's* control gave them the time, and their refraining from major armed clashes while they fashioned an effective chain of command for coordinating their efforts probably shielded developments among them from the Byzantine authorities' notice. In the end, five years separated eastern Bulgaria's fall in 971 and the outbreak of serious western Bulgarian-Byzantine fighting in 976.<sup>5</sup>

Although documentation is lacking, leadership of the western *bolyari* ultimately coalesced around a certain Nikola, *komit* (B: "count") of either Sredets (formerly Serdika, sometimes called Triaditsa by Bulgarians) in the Sofia Basin or the Prespa district in Macedonia, and his four sons—David, Moisei, Aron, and Samuil, who collectively were known as the Komitopuli, or the "Sons of the Count."<sup>6</sup> Little is known of Nikola other than his title, *komit*, suggesting he was an influential nobleman who exerted administrative and military authority over some extensive region of Bulgaria's western lands. Whether he did so

as a Bulgarian provincial governor or as an ex-Byzantine thematic commander who defected to the Bulgarians has been a matter of scholarly debate. Although the former seems the most probable, the latter was given credence by a reference in the *Universal History* of Stephen (Asolik) of Taron, an early eleventh-century Armenian historian. Stephen claimed that Nikola's family originally hailed from Armenia. If such were the case, then Nikola may have been an Armenian in Byzantine military service who, after being transferred to the Balkans, defected to the Bulgarians.<sup>7</sup> As for his sons, it is generally accepted that there were four, with David the eldest and Samuil the youngest, based on Skylitzes. Stephen of Taron noted only two—Samuil (the eldest) and Aron—but his reference, probably based on hearsay in Armenia, reflected the family's situation in 986.<sup>8</sup>

Bulgarian scholars conjecturally portray Nikola as a powerful and influential *bolyar* who enjoyed strong ties to the imperial court in Preslav and Tsar Petŭr. His loyalty was rewarded by his elevation to the rank of *komit* with extensive governing authority in Bulgaria's western possessions to help guarantee central control over those distant lands. After the Rus' and Byzantine incursions into Bulgaria's eastern territories and the fall of Preslav, the western *bolyari* rallied around him in hopes of preserving Bulgaria's independence and resuscitating its crippled imperial status. Nikola died prior to the outbreak of hostilities with Byzantium in 976, but his sons, who were his joint heirs, inherited his leadership role.<sup>9</sup>

By late summer 976 the Komitopuli commenced serious raids into Byzantium's neighboring themes, particularly those on the fringes of Macedonia and in Morava and Ras (if these middle Danubian themes actually existed). Their operations' timing was propitious. Tzimiskes had died and the rightful Macedonian heir Basil II (963–1025), who then was 18 years old, laid claim to the crown. Basil initially was dependent on his eunuch great-uncle Basil Lekapenos, the grand chamberlain. Lekapenos visualized his role in Basil's government as one replacing Nikephoros II and Tzimiskes, but he had formidable enemies among the leading eastern magnate families, who resented losing their dominance in the capital to a eunuch. A magnate rebellion erupted in summer 976 against Lekapenos, led by Bardas Skleros, the hero of Arkadiopolis, and Byzantium was thrown into a civil war lasting for three years. Virtually all of the empire's veteran troops eventually were caught up in the fighting in Anatolia, leaving inexperienced recruits to man the thematic forces in the Balkans facing the Komitopuli's warriors.<sup>10</sup>

Almost nothing is factually known of the Komitopuli's organization and administration of the western Bulgarian lands when they commenced military actions against the Byzantines because of the nature of the sources. Bulgarian historians claim the brothers shared governing authority in a "tetrarchy," but how that arrangement functioned remains murky. Perhaps a hierarchy based on seniority defined the distribution of power among them, with David, the eldest, initially serving as leader.<sup>11</sup> Just as likely, the brothers may have divided their patrimony into four relatively equal territorial shares, in each one brother exerted dominant authority over the resident *bolyari* while they jointly coordinated their governance and military efforts among themselves, with David presumably acting as de facto "chair person."<sup>12</sup>

Bulgarian scholarship purports to identify the brothers' actual holdings. Thus David controlled parts of southern Macedonia, using Voden (m: Edessa) and Mŭglen (or Moglena) as administrative centers. His lands faced Byzantium's Beroia (m: Veroia), Thessaloniki, and Drougoubiteia themes, threatening Byzantine-held Thessaloniki and Thessaly while protecting western Bulgaria from Byzantine strikes via the Vardar River valley. Northeast of David's domains, Moisei's holdings lay against Byzantium's Strymon theme. Headquartered in Strumitsa (m: Strumica), Moisei was strategically placed to threaten Byzantine Western Thrace and Serres while defending western Bulgarian territories from attack by way of the Struma River valley. North of Moisei, Aron controlled northeastern Macedonia and the Sofia Basin from his administrative seat at Sredets. His domains protected the western Bulgarian lands from Byzantine assaults off the High Thracian Plain and Thrace and guarded the important Diagonal highway from Sredets north. He was positioned to harry the High Thracian Plain and threaten Philippopolis. Finally, Samuil administered all of northwestern Bulgaria, north of the Sofia Basin and west of the Iskŭr River on the Danubian Plain, from his center at Vidin. His lands faced the Byzantine lower Danubian themes as well as those on the middle Danube (if they existed), allowing him to threaten Byzantium's hold on most former eastern and northern Bulgarian territories. Despite the reasonableness and detail of such an organization, this supposition remains unsupported by primary evidence.<sup>13</sup>

No matter how the Komitopuli's administrative organization functioned, it was disrupted in less than a year following the outbreak of hostilities. Opening a concerted offensive along the length of their frontier

with Byzantium aimed at regaining control of all pre-971 Bulgarian territories, in late summer 976 they attacked the Byzantines' border themes, meeting weak opposition. David's warriors ravaged the Beroia and Drougoubiteia themes while Moisei's men swept through the Strymon theme and threatened Serres. Bulgarian momentum on those fronts was blunted with the rapid and unexpected demise of the two brothers leading the incursions. While directing siege operations against Serres, Moisei was fatally struck down by a stone catapulted from the city's walls. Soon thereafter, his brother David was killed by a group of wandering Vlachs at a place known locally as Fair Oak Woods, somewhere along the road between Kastoria and Prespa.<sup>14</sup>

The brothers' deaths caused a cessation of Bulgarian military operations and an immediate shakeup in whatever administrative arrangements originally devised by the Komitopuli. After overrunning the two middle Danubian Byzantine themes (again, if they existed) and making serious inroads into former Bulgarian Danubian districts east of the Iskŭr, Samuil rushed to the southern Macedonian regions, where by 977 he rallied David's and Moisei's stalled troops to his standard.<sup>15</sup> Aron, who may have led Bulgarian raids against the High Thracian Plain, returned to Sredets and took control of Samuil's territories in the north, adding them to his own holdings in the Sofia Basin and northeastern Macedonia. The nature of the new power-sharing arrangement between the two surviving Komitopuli remains uncertain, but it is accepted that Samuil, although the younger brother, emerged as the dominant partner. Perhaps he was more militantly anti-Byzantine (or simply more warlike by nature) than Aron and thus won majority support among the *bolyari*, who were eager to persist in their military efforts.<sup>16</sup>

The Komitopuli's leadership was complicated by the unexpected appearance of former Tsar Boris and his eunuch brother Roman on their frontier sometime during 977. Following their humiliating treatment in 971, both had been held under loose house arrest in Constantinople. When news of the Komitopuli's militant actions reached them in 976, they sought to return to "free" Bulgarian territory and rightfully reclaim the imperial throne. Donning Byzantine military attire and acquiring sturdy mounts, the following year the two fled Constantinople unaccompanied by any retinue and rode hard for the western Bulgarian lands. On nearing the frontier, they dismounted and walked their winded horses through the forested terrain, with Boris advancing some distance ahead of Roman until he stumbled on a Bulgarian border outpost. Before Boris

could disclose his identity he was shot dead with an arrow by one of the guards, who mistook him for a Byzantine trooper. Luckily for Roman, his trailing behind saved his life. He witnessed his brother's fate and, shouting from a distance, convinced the guards that he was a Bulgarian prince in Byzantine garb and identified himself. Roman was taken into friendly custody and dispatched to Voden, where Samuil was situated at the time.<sup>17</sup>

News of the imperial dynast's presence spread rapidly among the *bolyari*, who flocked to Voden to demonstrate personally their enthusiasm for the legitimate ruling family. Aron arrived from Sredets to express his loyalty and consult with Samuil regarding their response to developments. The brothers soon learned a hard truth concerning their potential imperial ruler—Roman was a eunuch. Their precise reaction to that fact is unknown but has spawned scholarly speculation regarding the nature of the Bulgarians' leadership going forward from that time.<sup>18</sup>

One school of thought holds that, since Roman was a eunuch, he was disqualified from being *tsar*. Byzantine tradition rejected eunuchs occupying the imperial throne and, since Bulgaria embraced the Byzantine model, Roman could not have won imperial recognition at Voden. He therefore must have been given some nominally honored, but subordinate, position within the leadership headed by Samuil and Aron, serving to reinforce *bolyar* loyalty to the Komitopuli regime but lacking true governing authority. This interpretation was lent credibility by Skylitzes, who noted that in 1003 Roman (who by then had adopted the new name of Simeon) was the commander of Skopje who surrendered that stronghold to Basil II and was rewarded with patrician status, the title of prefect, and named *strategos* of Abydos in Anatolia.<sup>19</sup>

Another speculative school contends that Samuil and Aron pragmatically recognized Roman as the rightful successor to the vacant imperial throne despite (or possibly because of) his sexual handicap. The surviving Komitopuli may have chosen to ignore or greatly downplay Roman's physical condition because his titular reign helped ensure *bolyar* loyalty to a state ruled by a member of Krum's dynasty, dampening potential centrifugal tendencies existing among them. His inability to spawn heirs posed no long-term threat to the two brothers' retention of dominant state power since Roman, in return for their acknowledgement of his imperial standing, designated them his chief functionaries and military commanders. Support for this postulate has been found in the *History* of

Yahya of Antioch, where Roman's coronation as *tsar* was expressly noted and Samuil was depicted as Roman's loyal supreme lieutenant.<sup>20</sup>

Roman (977–997) probably was crowned Bulgarian *tsar* in Voden by the Bulgarian Orthodox church's primate, Archbishop-Patriarch German Gavril, who was present in the town at the time. German Gavril played the traditionally important religious role reserved for the Bulgarian patriarch in Roman's coronation in 977. The symbolism of the act achieved an important purpose desired by the Bulgarian leaders: The independent Bulgarian Empire and Orthodox state church, with their *tsar* and patriarch reigning over those territories controlled by the Komitopuli, were publicly declared alive, despite Byzantine claims to the contrary.<sup>21</sup>

Following his coronation, Roman played a minor role in the leadership headed by Samuil and Aron, serving more as a figurehead and cipher than actual ruler. His situation, however, may have been one he personally welcomed. While Samuil solidified his grasp on the reins of government and the military, Roman devoted his attention to religion and church matters. It was said that he founded the monastery of "St. George" as an imperial establishment on a hill outside Skopje in Macedonia, bestowing on it nearby villages for its support.<sup>22</sup> Except for a later account of his recapture by the Byzantines (discussed in the text that follows), little is known about Roman.<sup>23</sup> The same might be said for Samuil's elder brother Aron.

Aron apparently played a role of little note in the Komitopuli administration since he was infrequently mentioned in the sources. The scholarly consensus regarding Aron is that he was less warlike and more desirous of establishing peaceful relations with Byzantium than his militant younger brother. No anti-Byzantine military operations led by Aron can be found in the source record, but there exists indirect evidence that he may have continued Samuil's initial incursions into Byzantium's lower Danubian themes.<sup>24</sup> In 986 he was contacted by agents of Emperor Basil II offering him a separate peace arrangement and the hand of Basil's sister Anna in marriage. Although the peace and marriage came to naught when the Bulgarians discovered that the would-be bride dispatched to Sredets was not the imperial princess, the fact that Basil targeted Aron in the affair suggests that he had fallen out with Samuil by that year. Perhaps the rupture between the brothers was caused by Aron's pro-Byzantine sympathies or, just as possibly, because he resented being overshadowed by his more charismatic younger sibling following the events of 976–977.<sup>25</sup>



Samuil swiftly emerged as the paramount Bulgarian leader after 977, responsible for orchestrating a series of successful military operations against Byzantium's holdings in mainland Greece from Thessaloniki to Thessaly in the Hellas theme. Almost nothing is known concretely about those actions because few extant sources treat them, and those that do provide highly generalized depictions with little specific information prior to the middle of 986 (Fig. 7.1).<sup>26</sup>

A lone exception to the blank picture of Samuil's military operations against Byzantine Greece was his capture of the Thessalian regional center of Larisa in 986. According to the account in Kekavmenos's *Strategikon*, in 980 the author's like-named Armenian relative was appointed *strategos* of the Hellas theme and took up residence in Larisa. He held that post for three years, during which Samuil made annual spring raids into Thessaly. Each year, when the Bulgarians drew near Larisa, Kekavmenos would declare his loyalty to Samuil, thus sparing the city from attack and its surrounding fields from pillage. In the fall, after the crops were safely harvested and stored in city warehouses and the Bulgarians had departed, he would renounce his Bulgarian allegiance and renew his Byzantine affiliations. In 983 Kekavmenos was recalled and a new *strategos* appointed, who, on confronting Samuil's encroaching forces, opted to resist rather than feign submission. Samuil then destroyed the crops around Larisa and blockaded the city for the remainder of the campaigning season. This scenario was repeated for three consecutive years until, by 986, Larisa's inhabitants were reduced to starvation and surrendered the city to Samuil. Most of the population was carried off to Bulgarian Macedonia, forcibly resettled, and the men enlisted as new military recruits. Samuil had the remains of a local fourth-century bishop and saint, Akhilleios, disinterred and transported to his new capital at Prespa, where he erected a church to house the relics.<sup>27</sup>

Certain broad conclusions regarding Samuil's pre-986 military operations in southern Macedonia and mainland Greece can be drawn from the accounts of Larisa's fall. To have conducted annual incursions into Thessaly, he must have overrun and neutralized Byzantium's Drougoubiteia and Beroia themes in southern Macedonia. His yearly inroads had the appearance of raids, rather than invasions set on conquest, aimed at tapping into Thessaly's rich agricultural resources, which was the principal breadbasket for mainland Greece. Strategos Kekavmenos's duplicitous allegiances permitted Samuil to acquire



Fig. 7.1 Campaigns of Tsar Samuil, 980–1014

his “fair share” of the food production, and that relationship probably reflected a general approach taken by Samuil when treating other Byzantine strongholds and their commanders. Thus only if (or when) those officers refused to embrace fealty to Samuil did he resort to serious siege tactics, transfers of captured populations, and outright conquest. The refusal of Kekavmenos’s replacement at Larisa to submit to Samuil

resulted in the Bulgarians' seizure of the city, and Skylitzes related that "several" other fortresses suffered a similar fate. Scholars agree that Larisa's fall resulted in Samuil's conquest of Thessaly, inflicted a telling blow on Byzantium's Hellas theme, and pushed Bulgaria's southwestern border farther south than that of the pre-971 state. By 986 Bulgarian military successes in mainland Greece had thoroughly disrupted Byzantine thematic administration in numerous districts of the southern Balkans.<sup>28</sup>

Byzantium's inability to cope with the Bulgarians' militant assertions of their continued imperial independence after 976 stemmed from the ill effects of the civil war that erupted in Anatolia during the same year. That conflict ended after Emperor Basil II succeeded in removing his great-uncle Basil Lekapenos from the government and demoting the Domestic of the East Bardas Phokas from supreme military command, resulting in Basil taking full power in Byzantium's imperial government by early 986. Thus momentarily free of worries about threats to his authority from within the empire, the emperor finally could devote his attention to the Balkans and the troublesome Bulgarians.<sup>29</sup>

Prior to Basil successfully consolidating his imperial authority, the only token gesture made to address the Bulgarians' Balkan threats had been the transfer of some Armenian military colonists to the Macedonian theme's territories around Adrianople.<sup>30</sup> Soon after taking control in Constantinople, Basil first attempted to deal with the Bulgarians through diplomatic channels. He made an effort to divide their leadership by inducing Aron to break with his brother Samuil, using a proffered alliance bestowing on the elder Komitopul Byzantine recognition of his royal status and a proposed marriage with the emperor's sister as enticement. Basil's inexperience in diplomacy thwarted his embassy's success—the naive fraudulent substitution of a lowly courtier for his sister resulted in her clerical guardian's execution and Aron rejecting the proposed alliance.<sup>31</sup> Smarting from his failed diplomatic overture, coupled with the unwelcome news of Larisa's fall and the loss of Thessaly, Basil concluded that his only remaining option for stymying the Bulgarians was direct military action.

In summer 986 Basil prepared an assault on Bulgarian-held Sredets. Although some scholars have speculated that the campaign's objective reflected Basil's desire to punish Aron for rejecting the peace initiative, it is more likely that Sredets was chosen because of its strategic military importance. Just as Samuil's capture of Larisa gave him control of

Thessaly, taking Sredets would grant Basil possession of the Sofia Basin. The region was a communications hub, from which radiated routes leading to all corners of the Balkans. In military terms, control of the basin bestowed what military scholars term a secure “central position” and its attendant advantages in such matters as force concentration, operational flexibility, and lines of communication. By gaining and consolidating a hold on the region, Basil would drive a wedge into the center of the Bulgarians’ territories, splitting the forces under Samuil, in the south, from those led by Aron, in the north. He then would be positioned to concentrate on decisively dealing in detail with the Bulgarians threatening Byzantium’s lower Danubian themes and mainland Greece as and when he chose.<sup>32</sup>

Eager to demonstrate his supreme authority and distrustful of the Anatolian magnate establishment, Basil, who lacked military experience of any kind, assumed overall command of the force mustered for the campaign. His army primarily was composed of eastern Balkan thematic units and the European elements of the *tagmata*, reinforced by a contingent of Armenian guards, but its actual numerical strength remains unknown (perhaps between 15,000 and 20,000 combatants). Basil pointedly refused to draw on the empire’s eastern troops and their magnate commanders of questionable loyalty, and did not bother to enlist or consult Bardas Phokas, the empire’s leading military figure. Perhaps out of necessity, he assigned at least one Anatolian commander, the former *doux* (duke) of Antioch, Leo Melissenos, to the Balkan force. Once the campaign was launched, Basil displayed wariness of the former *doux*, whose earlier lackluster performance in Anatolia had raised questions concerning his trustworthiness, by relegating him to a rearguard mission on the High Thracian Plain, at a distance from the active operational front in the Sofia Basin.

In spite of his sound grand tactical plan for the campaign, Basil’s overriding suspicion of the Anatolian military’s loyalty fatally compromised his ability to carry it to a successful conclusion. From Basil down, the army’s leaders mostly were inexperienced in warfare, and those among them who had previously faced the Bulgarians held disquieting memories of those encounters. The same can be said for the men under their authority, who were mostly green, second-line thematic troopers lacking the discipline, experience, and fortitude of the hardened eastern veterans. The deleterious nature of the army’s internal condition only became apparent after operations were well underway so that, when Basil

led his troops northward in late June or early July 986, he did so with confidence in a successful outcome.<sup>33</sup>

Advancing up the Diagonal highway from Thrace, the army reached Philippopolis on the High Thracian Plain. There Basil detached units under Melissenos's command to serve as a rear guard tasked with keeping the nearby mountain passes open and protecting his line of communication to Constantinople. He then pressed on with the rest of his troops into the rugged, heavily wooded Sredna Gora Mountains where, on penetrating Bulgarian-held territory, he halted and threw up a fortified encampment in one of the few openings in the dense forests at a location known as Stoponion (B: Shtipone; m: Ihtiman), some 35 miles (56 km) southeast of Sredets. After consolidating his main force, Basil set out precipitously for Sredets in hopes of taking it by storm or a swift siege.<sup>34</sup> On arriving before the city, Basil found its ramparts fully manned and enemy troops occupying the slopes of nearby Mount Vitosha, an eminence lying to the south of Sredets that dominated the intervening lowlands of the basin. Determining that an immediate storming operation was out of the question, he decided to capture the city by siege and established a basecamp on the flatlands to its east, where the enemy on Vitosha would not pose a direct threat to the army's rear.

Word of the Byzantine military build-up for a strike on Sredets reached Samuil in Macedonia by early July and he rushed his troops to the region while Aron concentrated his men in and around the threatened city. Masked by the Lozen range of the Sredna Goras, separating the narrow defile cut by the Iskŭr River in the mountains southeast of Vitosha from Basil's approach route, Samuil set up a base in the vicinity of Urvich, a fortress guarding the Iskŭr passage south of Sredets, soon after arriving and deployed his men (mostly light infantry and cavalry) onto the thickly wooded northern and eastern faces of Vitosha. Controlling the southern heights overlooking Sredets and the Sofia Basin, Samuil possessed an excellent observation post on the lofty mountain, from which all Byzantine operations on the basin's plain were in full view. This advantage played a telling role in thwarting Basil's efforts to take the city. Samuil realized that confronting the invaders in open battle on the plain was unnecessary (and highly risky) since, thanks to his position on the high ground, he instead could observe his enemy's maneuvers, take timely counteractions when needed, and inflict damaging blows from ambush on their line of communication and efforts to forage locally while maintaining a secure defensive position on the heights.

Aron's troops needed only to hold out in Sredets and cause as much damage to the besiegers as possible to render Samuil's tactical advantage successful in forcing a Byzantine retreat.

The result desired by Samuil probably arrived sooner than expected. Only after Basil initiated siege tactics did the flawed nature of the Byzantine force become apparent. Leo the Deacon, who was present in the Byzantine encampment and an eyewitness, later bitterly criticized the army's conduct of its unsuccessful siege operation:

... the army fell into indolence and sluggishness as a result of the incompetence of the commanders. Thus the Mysians [*i.e.*, Bulgarians] ambushed them first, when they left the camp for forage and fodder, and killed many of them, and carried off a large number of their pack animals and horses. Then, after the siege machines and the other contrivances accomplished nothing, because of the inexperience of the men who brought them up against the walls, and they [the machines] were set on fire by the enemy, and when lack of supplies began to overwhelm the army, since the provisions they brought with them were already exhausted because they did not consume them sparingly but greedily,... the army packed up and headed back...<sup>35</sup>

Leo the Deacon's account was vivid testimony to the combination of factors that led to Basil's defeat at Sedets. The inexperience and ineptitude of the officers and troops in performing the necessary tasks in siege operations—particularly the inability to keep the men gainfully occupied, the failure to maintain adequate security measures, the troops' inexperience in warfare, and the inefficient consumption of provisions—made their efforts ineffective and costly. From their positions on Vitosha, Samuil's warriors effectively disrupted the Byzantines' foraging efforts to replenish their dwindling supplies, crippled their crucial animal herd, and inflicted telling casualties, while Aron's garrison in Sredets conducted effective sorties against Byzantine positions in front of the city, destroying numerous siege engines in the process. Foiled by the poor performance of his officers (including himself) and troops, as well as by the Bulgarians' successful tactical countermeasures, after 20 frustrating days Basil called off the siege and ordered a retreat.

Although the sorry military situation that had evolved was enough to account for Basil's decision, both Skylitzes and Zonaras advanced a different, political reason for his hasty withdrawal. Basil's top subordinate commander was the Domestic of the West Kontostephanos, a sworn

personal enemy of Leo Melissenos. He approached Basil one night with the tidings (later proven false) that Melissenos had abandoned his positions near Philippopolis and marched on Constantinople in a bid to win the imperial throne. While it is questionable that Kontostephanos's report of treachery in his rear was the primary reason for Basil ordering a retreat, it doubtlessly played into the emperor's suspicions of disloyalty among the military's magnate clique and reinforced his desire to return to the capital with all possible speed following the setback at Sredets (Fig. 7.2).<sup>36</sup>

Breaking camp in the early hours of 15 August, the retiring Byzantines retraced their approach steps along the Diagonal highway. Marching without stop, at the end of their trek's first stage they went into camp for the night on the edge of the Sofia Basin, somewhere near modern Lesnovo, facing the passage through the Sredna Gora Mountains on the marrow. Bulgarian units from Sredets's garrison monitored their movements and harried their rear throughout the day, serving to intensify their demoralization following the failed siege and heighten their anxieties over potential dangers lying ahead in the mountain passes. Rumors that the Bulgarians had occupied those escape corridors and were waiting in ambush spread among them overnight, so that, when the retreat resumed the following day, the Byzantines displayed more concern for speed than security. They pushed rapidly southward down the Diagonal highway through the broken and forested country of the western Sredna Goras, reaching the camp at Stoponion by early evening. Force security had been lax on the march but, except for the small number of Bulgarian troops from Sredets perpetually hovering in the army's rear, no significant enemy threats had been encountered during the hasty 20-mile (33 km) trudge.

That night a meteorite lit the sky above the camp. The nervous troops interpreted it as an omen of looming catastrophe since most were familiar with stories about Trojans and classical Romans portraying such phenomena as precursors of destruction or disaster.<sup>37</sup> The unsettling impact of the meteorite disturbed all ranks in the Byzantine army, perhaps including Emperor Basil, and when the army renewed its retreat the next morning (17 August), advancing into the most rugged, precipitous, and wooded terrain on the line of march, it did so in a precipitous fashion with little concern for basic security measures. No advance units were dispatched ahead of the main force to scout the route and secure critical passages. Adequate flank guards were not mounted to secure

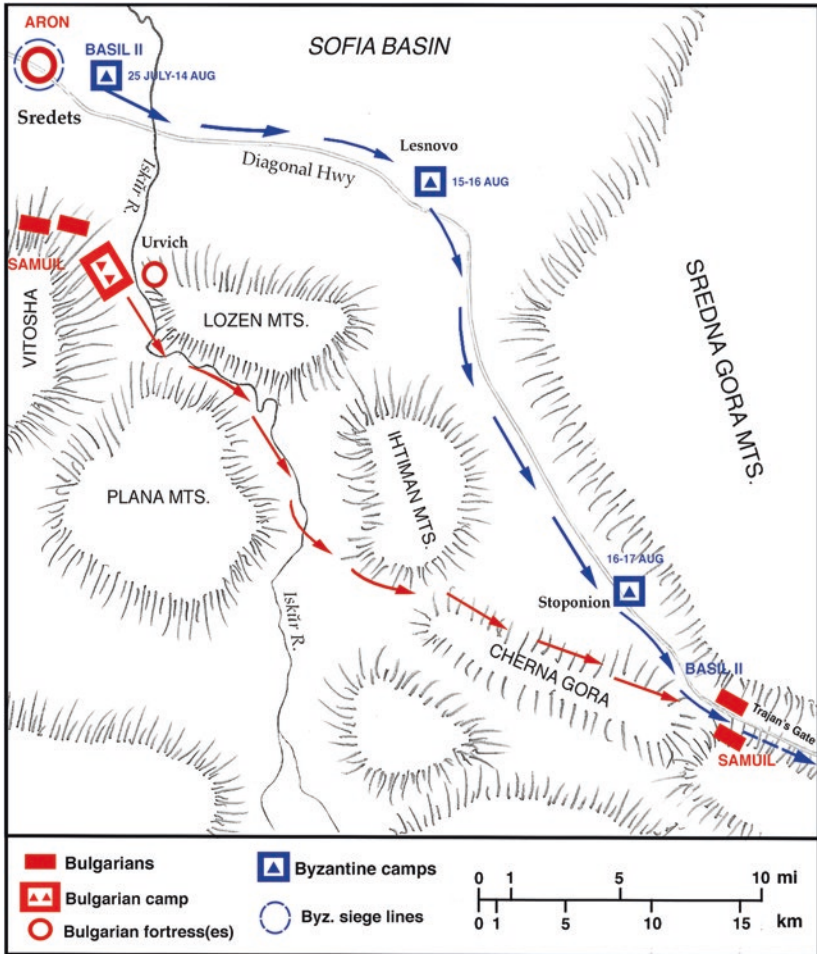


Fig. 7.2 Battle of Trajan's Gate, 17 August 986

neighboring heights and protect the main force from enemy ambushes, nor were tight unit marching order, strict discipline, and coordinated main-force command control enforced. Thus the same internal deficiencies that stymied the siege operations at Sredets continued to plague the Byzantines on their retreat. The failure to implement effective security procedures cost them dearly when they began traversing the steep pass



lying a short distance southeast of Stoponion known as “Trajan’s Gate” (or the “Bulgarian Pass” [to the Byzantines]; m: Ihtiman Pass).<sup>38</sup>

During the two days that it took Basil to reach Stoponion, Samuil, knowing that the Byzantines were retracing their steps by way of the Diagonal highway and benefiting from what he probably did not realize was the advantage of “interior lines,” raced his troops (the total number of whom is unknown) southward by way of an alternative route in an attempt to get ahead of the enemy army and occupy “Trajan’s Gate,” the most advantageous stretch of terrain for an ambush attack along the Byzantines’ line of retreat. Samuil’s successful flanking march was an apt display of the Bulgarians’ adeptness at maneuvering over the rugged Balkan terrain. Moving by way of the southern Iskür River valley and keeping the heights of the Lozen and Ihtiman ranges of the Sredna Goras between themselves and the Byzantines, the Bulgarians entered the plain on which sits present-day Samokov. There they turned eastward, along the wooded slopes of the Cherni (B: “Black”) Hills, and ensconced themselves in hiding on the forested shoulders of the “Gate” by the evening of 16 August.

The next day the demoralized Byzantines arrived at the pass, their units strung out and disorganized, totally unaware of the enemy warriors lurking in the dense timber on the heights above the roadway. Samuil waited until they entered the difficult passage, permitting the steep, broken terrain to disrupt further their units’ already muddled cohesion. When it became obvious that the Byzantines’ combat effectiveness was seriously impaired by their struggles to negotiate the troublesome ground, Samuil sounded the signal to attack. In moments, the fears of the Byzantine troopers materialized. Thousands of Bulgarian warriors rose from their ambush positions and flung themselves with murderous impact on the jumbled, disordered Byzantine units clogged along the highway. The stricken army swiftly dissolved into a mass of hysterical, fleeing fugitives, abandoning their standards, baggage train, and even Basil’s imperial command tent and treasury. The emperor was spared death or capture by a contingent of his Armenian guards, who formed a human wall around him and fought their way out of the pass by way of an alternative passage (perhaps nearby Momin [B: “Maiden’s”] Pass). Leo the Deacon escaped death through the survival instincts of his horse, which seemingly of its own volition outraced the rampaging Bulgarians to higher ground and eventually to safety beyond the pass. The fleeing survivors of the fiasco in “Trajan’s Gate” collected themselves somewhat

only on reaching the High Thracian Plain, after which those shattered remnants of Basil's defeated army limped back to Philippopolis, leaving Samuil's victorious warriors in possession of the field and copious plunder.<sup>39</sup>

The consequences of the Byzantine debacle at "Trajan's Gate" became apparent almost immediately. Byzantium's military forces in most Balkan themes were ruined. Emperor Basil was discredited in the eyes of his opponents and his leadership capabilities were called into serious question in the imperial capital. Within weeks of the news trumpeting Basil's humiliating defeat in Bulgaria reaching Anatolia and the Arab states beyond, Byzantium was rocked by a renewed, magnate-led rebellion. Only a military alliance (988) forged with the Kievan Grand Prince Vladimir I (980–1015), involving the Rus' ruler's conversion to Orthodox Christianity and his marriage to the emperor's sister Anna (this time for real) in return for furnishing 6000 Rus' mercenary warriors for the emperor's *tagmata* (known as the Varangian Guard), finally permitted Basil to overcome the rebels in 989. Basil spent two years following the rebellion's suppression attempting to weaken the magnates' monopoly on military command, consolidating his own supreme authority over the army, and dealing harshly with political opposition in both Constantinople and Anatolia.<sup>40</sup>

Samuil was quick to take advantage of Byzantium's predicament. Aware that the Byzantines' thematic forces were seriously weakened following "Trajan's Gate," he unleashed his warriors against the Byzantine themes on the Danubian Plain and in Dobrudzha. Encountering little organized resistance, those regions fell into the Bulgarians' hands within a year. The fortresses and former Bulgarian capitals of Preslav and Pliska, as well as the formerly important entrepôt of Pereyaslavets, were recovered, but the strong defensive fortifications of Drūstūr may have spared it from a similar fate, possibly rendering it a lone Byzantine outpost in a sea of Bulgarian-controlled territory.<sup>41</sup> The Bulgarians overrunning the lower Danubian regions ostensibly acted in the name of their titular ruler Tsar Roman, which probably eased their task because the regional *bolyari* would have readily declared fealty to the legitimate Bulgarian dynasty that once ruled from their midst. With the acquisition of nearly all the lands along the lower Danube, the Bulgarian Empire controlled by the surviving Komitopuli approached that of the pre-971 state in terms of territorial expanse, stretching from Macedonia and Albania, in the west, to the Black Sea, in the east.<sup>42</sup>

Soon after consolidating Bulgaria's hold on the lower Danubian regions, Samuil turned to addressing what he now considered his intolerable governing partnership with Aron. Tensions between the two brothers emerged in 977 and persisted over the decade since. Aron displayed far less belligerence toward the Byzantines than Samuil and may have espoused sympathies for striking an accommodation with them. Although he performed more than adequately during the Byzantine assault on Sredets, he did so because, given the situation, he had no other choice. That affair, however, had been preceded by a Byzantine embassy offering Aron recognition as an independent ruler, separate from the rest of Bulgaria controlled by Samuil and Tsar Roman. Despite the Byzantine initiative having fallen through over a technicality, there were no guarantees that a similar effort in the future would not succeed. Now that Bulgaria had reclaimed its former heartland possessions on the lower Danube, and they theoretically lay under Aron's northern administrative authority, a future successful deal between him and the Byzantines could tear the state asunder. While personal ambition on his part cannot be discounted as a motive, Samuil concluded that the risk of Aron's potential defection was not worth running and must be eliminated.

With his position of dominance within the imperial leadership secure, Samuil took the drastic step of having his brother and governing partner murdered. He and his troop of assassins tracked Aron down to his summer residence (possibly at m: Tsarichina) located in a vale named Razmetanitsa, near modern Dupnitsa in the upper Struma valley. On 14 June 987 (or 988) Aron and his entire family were butchered, except for his young son Ivan Vladislav, who reportedly was spared through the intercession of his cousin Gavril Radomir, Samuil's own young son who accompanied him in that bloody escapade. The death of Aron ended the threat of potential treachery in Bulgaria's eastern and northern possessions, cowed any existing "peace party" in the state, and left Samuil the lone Komitopol atop nominal Tsar Roman's state leadership.<sup>43</sup> His paramount position of power now cemented throughout Bulgaria, Samuil turned his attentions to regions in the western and southern Balkans that were the foci of his personal military and political ambitions.

The muddled nature of the sources (primarily Skylitzes) is such that a reliable chronology of events following the murder of Aron in 987/988 until the opening of the eleventh century is impossible to discern, although a few, which occurred during the closing years of the 980s and the latter half of the 990s, can reasonably be dated.<sup>44</sup> Soon after dealing

with Aron, Samuil began threatening the vicinity of Byzantine-held Thessaloniki and the crippled themes to its west. Repeated Bulgarian raids on the Khalkidike Peninsula in 987 and 988 led to the abandonment of the Hierissos (m: Ierissos) monastery of Gomaton during the latter year.<sup>45</sup> Probably in 989 the fortress and thematic center of Beroia, 45 miles (72 km) west-southwest of Thessaloniki, fell to Samuil while his subordinate Dimitŭr Polemarh besieged and captured the fortress of Servia, located 30 miles (48 km) southwest of Beroia, signaling the total collapse of Byzantium's thematic administration in northern Greece and southern Macedonia outside of Thessaloniki.<sup>46</sup> Having bottled the Byzantine forces in northern Greece within the relative confines of that city's theme, and retaining his hold on Thessaly in central Greece, Samuil most likely then led his warriors northwestward against the Adriatic port-city of Dyrrakhion.

Possession of Dyrrakhion would confer rich benefits on Bulgaria since it was the western terminus of the *Via Egnatia*, the primary land artery traversing northern Greece, Macedonia, and Albania, which Samuil now controlled between the neighborhood of Thessaloniki and the heights of the Albanian Alps above the Adriatic city. Its port would provide an outlet for Bulgarian commerce and diplomatic overtures with the west. For Byzantium, loss of the city would thoroughly disrupt its presence in the Adriatic. It is plausible (though not provable) that sometime between 989 and 990, while the Byzantines remained hamstrung by the second Anatolian civil war of Basil's reign, Samuil achieved one of his greatest coups in gaining control of Dyrrakhion. He marched his troops down from the nearby mountains and threatened to besiege the city. Given that Emperor Basil's government at the time was totally preoccupied with affairs in Anatolia and had no troops to spare for reinforcing the city, Dyrrakhion's wealthy governing merchants, led by John Khryselios, sought terms from Samuil to stave off disruptive and costly military actions. The concluded arrangement reflected the Bulgarian commander's consistent policy toward treating fortified enemy strongholds, in many ways similar to his former dealings with Kekavmenos at Larisa. Khryselios and his fellow merchants swore fealty to Samuil and agreed to permit the Bulgarians free access to the city in return for Samuil calling off the siege and permitting them to continue governing in the name of the Bulgarian *tsar* (Roman) and pursuing their commercial interests. To reinforce the pact and ensure against future duplicity by the city's ruling merchants, Samuil married Khryselios's daughter Agatha,

demonstrating the importance the Bulgarian leadership placed on controlling Dyrrakhion as an Adriatic gateway.<sup>47</sup>

In spring 991, with the civil war in Anatolia ended, Emperor Basil was free to treat the dangerously expanding Bulgarian threat to Byzantium's holdings in the Balkans. Little of them remained beyond Thrace, the High Thracian Plain, Thessaloniki, and Greece south of Thessaly. He again determined that only military measures could thwart future additional territorial losses, but he no longer was the military neophyte of 986. He had learned the hard lessons taught by his Sredets campaign and the civil wars: Successful imperial authority depended on absolute control of a loyal army honed to the highest level of operational efficiency. Basil studied and mastered the complex organizational infrastructure of his armed forces, gaining an understanding of command functions at all levels and the importance of matching qualified, loyal individuals to the various officer positions. Convinced that military success required forces capable and efficient in every way, he now depended primarily on well-trained professional and mercenary units, such as the expanded *tagmata* and the Varangians, hardened by iron discipline, rigorous drill, and *esprit de corps*, rather than on the traditional *themata*, whose effectiveness was often hampered by indiscipline, perfunctory training, and questionable morale. The armies Basil led on campaign—numbering, on average, some 23,000 men—demonstrated his commitment to quality over quantity and proved highly effective and ultimately successful.<sup>48</sup>

Basil initiated hostilities with the Bulgarians in 991 and fighting extended over a period of four years.<sup>49</sup> Little is known of the details. Basil opened military operations by marching to Thessaloniki and then launching attacks against neighboring Bulgarian positions to the west and north of the city.<sup>50</sup> One of his first objectives was Beroia, a former thematic center guarding a primary passage in the Pindos Mountains linking the Aegean coast west of Thessaloniki to Macedonia's interior. After retaking that fortress, Basil installed one of his Armenian commanders, Gregory Taronites, as its governor.<sup>51</sup> Perhaps in conjunction with the Beroia operation, but purportedly sometime in 991, Bulgarian Tsar Roman was captured by the Byzantines and dispatched to Constantinople under house arrest.<sup>52</sup> How and where Roman was seized remain unknown, but his capture made little impression on Bulgarian resistance, demonstrating Samuil's solid grip on military and political leadership in Bulgaria at the time. Other than these two events, nothing

specifically is known of Basil's Balkan campaigns between 991 and the close of 994. The available sources simply noted that he relentlessly conducted operations that resulted in capturing or destroying numerous Bulgarian fortresses in southern Macedonia and northern Greece.<sup>53</sup>

Basil's operations in the Balkans during this period have been characterized as successful.<sup>54</sup> If so, success was relative and confined to the recovery of some former Macedonian thematic territories in Thessaloniki's vicinity. That progress was slow and limited was attested by Basil's diplomatic efforts to bolster his endeavors. He reached out to Jovan Vladimir, prince of Duklja (d. 1016), then the leading and largest Serbian state following the death of Ražkan ruler Časlav around 960. In 992 Jovan dispatched an embassy to Basil for sealing an alliance that, in circumventing Samuil's intervening territories, experienced harrowing adventures before arriving in Constantinople.<sup>55</sup> Little concrete military assistance came of the Dukljan accord. Basil also solicited aid from Venice, nominally a Byzantine city at the time, against the Bulgarian presence in Dyrрахion as well as from Croatian King Stjepan Držislav (*ca.* 969–997), who possessed a small navy and previously (986) had been made a *patrikios*, recognized as king, and granted his royal regalia by Basil. These two friendly states ultimately provided him with only marginal active assistance.<sup>56</sup>

Constrained to deal personally with pressing developments at Aleppo, Basil left the Balkans in 994 with his main army. He charged Gregory Taronites, *doux* of Thessaloniki and commander of the forces remaining behind, with continuing to press the Bulgarians in Macedonia and northern Greece. Samuil sensed that the military initiative had shifted in his favor with Basil's departure. Since 991 he had been forced to adopt a defensive posture. Now he reverted to the offensive and began serious raiding operations around Thessaloniki. In 995, faced with heightened Bulgarian incursions, Taronites ordered his son Ashot to lead a reconnaissance force into the nearby hills and spy out the enemy while he followed at a distance with a contingent of Thessaloniki's garrison, hoping to intercept the raiders and bringing them to battle on advantageous terms. Ashot was drawn into an ambush and captured by the Bulgarians. Learning of his son's fate, Taronites rushed his men into the hills, attempting to catch the enemy and free Ashot, but was, in his turn, enticed into a trap by a Bulgarian feigned retreat, surrounded, and killed in a savagely fought engagement.<sup>57</sup> Basil thereafter promoted John Khaldos to replace Taronites at Thessaloniki but, soon after taking

command, he too was captured in yet another encounter outside the city. Khaldos subsequently spent the next 22 years in Bulgarian custody.<sup>58</sup>

Despite weakening the Byzantine garrison at Thessaloniki during 995, and probably regaining many of the positions lost since 991, Samuil was ill equipped to besiege the fortified city since he possessed no navy. Instead, realizing he needed to strike while Basil was absent in the east, Samuil opened a new front against Byzantium in mainland Greece. In early spring 996 he struck what remained of his enemy's Hellas theme and the territories lying to its south. The Bulgarians swept through Akhaia and Aitolia, inflicting widespread devastation as they progressed. The cities of Salona (m: Amphissa) and Galaxidion (a port on the Gulf of Corinth) were captured and sacked and their inhabitants either enslaved or put to the sword.<sup>59</sup> Fear spread throughout Greece as stories of Bulgarian atrocities circulated. It was said that Basil Apokavkos, *strategos* of the Peloponnesian theme stationed in Corinth, grew so fearful of the looming Bulgarian advance that he called on a saintly individual from the Peloponnese named Nikon to dispel his fears.<sup>61</sup> Apokavkos never had to face his demons because events forced Samuil to cease his southerly encroachments and turn northward.

After Khaldos's defeat and capture outside Thessaloniki in 995, Emperor Basil filled the vacant position of that city's *doux* with a close and trusted associate, Nikephoros Ouranos, granting him supreme command in the Balkans and a large contingent of tagmatic troops. With the main Bulgarian force occupied in Greece, in 996 Ouranos reconsolidated Byzantine control in the regions surrounding Thessaloniki and then marched southward into Thessaly, meeting only light opposition. He easily recaptured Larisa and made it his operational center and supply depot for a strike into the rear of Samuil's army, which was engrossed with pillaging regions near the Corinthian isthmus. Samuil received word that the Byzantines had retaken Larisa and were threatening his rear. He broke off his operations near Corinth and sped his men northward to confront the troubling threat, carrying prisoners and rich plunder with them. Passing the site of the ancient battle at Thermopylai in a driving rainstorm, the Bulgarians arrived on the southern bank of the Sperkheios River, somewhere near modern Lamia, where they discovered Ouranos and his force approaching the river from the opposite direction.

The Byzantine *doux* left all his baggage in Larisa and drove his professional troops by forced marches in an effort to bring Samuil to battle as swiftly as possible. On reaching the vicinity of the Sperkheios,

Ouranos found the Bulgarians encamped on the opposite bank of the rain-swollen river. He ordered his men to bivouac nearby while he dispatched scouts to reconnoiter the enemy position. They soon informed him that the Bulgarian camp was vulnerable to attack. Despite knowing of the Byzantines' presence north of the river, Samuil thought that the recent rains had rendered that watercourse unfordable and did not properly entrench his encampment. That smug failure cost Samuil dearly. In Ouranos, he faced an intelligent opponent who was a natural master of the military arts. Eager to benefit from his enemy's misstep, Ouranos immediately sent out parties scouting for usable fording sites and a suitable one was soon discovered. That night (the date is unknown) the Byzantines broke camp, forded the river, and deployed in battle formation against the Bulgarian encampment without being observed. They fell on the unsuspecting Bulgarians before dawn and wreaked havoc, slaughtering many before they could properly arm themselves. It was said that 12,000 Bulgarians perished while the rest made off into the hills as best they could. The numerous prisoners held by the Bulgarians were freed, and the Byzantine troopers acquired plentiful booty by stripping the bodies of the fallen and plundering the Bulgarians' abandoned baggage train. Both Samuil and his son Gavril Radomir were wounded in the fighting and only escaped with their lives by hiding among the dead bodies until nightfall, when they stole out of the wrecked camp and fled into the nearby Aitolian heights. Once safely away from the scene of carnage, Samuil rallied the remnants of his crushed army and retreated to Macedonia.<sup>62</sup>

Sperkheios was the first costly defeat suffered by Samuil in 20 years of fighting the Byzantines and its repercussions must have been telling. For over a year following the debacle he undertook no known military operations, suggesting that both his army's combat capabilities and his leadership position were seriously undermined by the event. Replacing the heavy losses in men and armaments and rebuilding an effective force required time. The military impact of the defeat seemingly went beyond matters of material losses. The extent of the disaster apparently influenced Samuil's subsequent strategic and tactical thinking. He came to realize that, despite his previous string of victories, the Byzantines were enemies whose military power could not be underestimated. He never again attempted long, open-ended operations deep into Byzantine territory. Instead, he settled for defending Bulgaria's borders, resorting to "guerrilla warfare" in confronting his enemy and avoiding pitched battles



whenever possible. Strikes into Byzantine possessions were launched only to attain specific, limited tactical objectives determined by circumstances.<sup>63</sup> After Sperkheios, the only large-scale offensive operations undertaken by Samuil were aimed at Byzantine allies beyond Bulgaria's borders in the Balkans' northwest.

With their nominal *tsar* languishing in captivity, and having sustained a stunning defeat in Greece, the Bulgarian *bolyari's* morale must have been shaken, calling into question Samuil's continued leadership as Roman's surrogate. Samuil grew so concerned about the condition of his army and the loyalty of his subordinates that in 997 he opened negotiations with Basil in a letter aimed at forging a cessation of hostilities, allegedly promising to accept Byzantine clientage. His attempted rapprochement with Basil was cut short when word reached him that Roman had died in Constantinople. The news transformed Samuil's leadership situation. Now freed of acting in the name of a titular ruler who was the last scion of Krum's dynasty, Samuil seized the opportunity and had himself officially proclaimed *tsar* (997–1014) as Roman's legitimate successor and new dynastic patriarch to preserve the state's independent imperial continuity. The act rallied most of the empire's *bolyari* to him, especially those in its western lands, and encouraged him to persist in the struggle with Byzantium.<sup>64</sup>

Samuil was crowned *tsar*, probably in late summer 997, at his new imperial capital of Ohrid, by the Bulgarian Patriarch Filip.<sup>65</sup> The location of his capital in Macedonia rather than in the Danubian lands, where Bulgaria's former capitals were situated, reflected the realities of his empire. Ohrid sat in a basin surrounded by mountains, making it more readily defensible than the former capitals at Preslav and Pliska, which lay on the open Danubian Plain. Bolstering these defensive priorities was Ohrid's location in the west and not within easy striking distance of his enemy, whose core territories lay in the Balkans' southeast. Samuil's new western administrative center thus was militarily more secure against Byzantine attack than the former capitals. Moreover, Ohrid enjoyed symbolic status as a cradle of Bulgarian Orthodox culture dating to Knyaz Boris's time, rivaling Preslav in that role. In addition, Samuil understood that his basis of power lay in the loyalty of his western *bolyar* clients who had followed him since 976, if not before. The eastern, Danubian *bolyari* had been brought under his sway only recently, so their allegiance was less tested and probably not as solid as their western counterparts. Despite claims by some modern nationalist scholars that Samuil's state

was a “Macedonian” empire ruled by an “Armenian,” such present-day concepts as nationalism and ethnicity did not apply to the early medieval Balkans. All signs indicate that Samuil and his Bulgarian and Byzantine contemporaries considered the empire and its ruler Bulgarian.<sup>66</sup>

Little is known of the internal workings of Samuil’s empire. A chance notice in Skylitzes provided the only extant evidence for domestic matters, noting that Bulgaria’s subjects paid taxes in kind (because money was not minted by any early medieval Bulgarian monarch): Every Bulgarian owning a yoke of oxen paid the state a measure of grain, the same amount of millet, and a jar of wine.<sup>67</sup> Extensive architectural remains—mostly fortifications and churches—dating to the time testify to Samuil’s willingness to invest resources into structures fortifying his state militarily and spiritually, while the lack of known literary activity suggests he possessed little interest in subsidizing intellectual endeavors.<sup>68</sup> It is assumed that the imperial administrative structure inherited by the western Bulgarians from *tsars* Petŭr and Boris was retained, but no concrete evidence for this exists. Perhaps reflecting a longstanding organization was the use made of an extensive fortress network in administering the empire’s territories. Each region possessed a large fortress that served as its center, governed by an important *bolyar* commander overseeing subordinate *bolyari* commanding surrounding, smaller forts. These men most likely owned estates or manors in the immediate vicinities of their stations. This secular military-administrative network seemingly was reinforced in the religious sphere by a corresponding network of Orthodox bishoprics centered on Ohrid and Prespa.<sup>69</sup>

Having rebuilt his army and legitimized his ruling position, in 998 Samuil returned to the field, but did not move directly against Byzantium. He instead struck at his enemy’s Dalmatian and Serbian allies lying to Bulgaria’s northwest. Pushing first into the rugged terrain of Duklja, he forced its youthful ruler Jovan Vladimir to retreat into the mountains for refuge. Leaving a contingent of troops to watch the Dukljans, Samuil unleashed his main force on the nearby Adriatic port of Ulcinj and laid it to siege. While those operations were in progress, Jovan Vladimir, considering continued resistance futile, surrendered to Samuil and was dispatched under arrest to Ohrid (or Prespa). Despite gaining control of Duklja, the siege of Ulcinj proved fruitless. The Bulgarians settled for ravaging the surrounding countryside and then moved northward along the Dalmatian coast, inflicting widespread devastation as they advanced. Kotor was sacked and the relics of St.

Tryphon, housed in one of its churches, were disinterred and transported to Ohrid to bestow increased sanctity on Samuil's capital.<sup>70</sup> Dubrovnik (or Ragusa), then an island-city, successfully resisted the Bulgarians but its coastal hinterlands were plundered. The devastation wrought by Samuil's warriors in Dalmatia extended as far northward as parts of Držislav's Croatia and the port-city of Zadar before, facing increasing Venetian resistance in the coastal regions, they turned southeastward. Passing through Bosnia and Raška, where the local *župani* swore clientage to Samuil, the Bulgarians returned to their homeland.<sup>71</sup>

With the close of operations in Dalmatia and the Serbian regions, Samuil's Bulgarian Empire reached its greatest territorial extent. Although he had lost much of Thessaly to Byzantium, he gained compensation in the northwestern Balkans. By the end of 998 he directly controlled Macedonia, the Sofia Basin, Albania with an outlet on the Adriatic at Dyrrakhion, northern portions of Thessaly and Epiros, virtually all of the Danubian Plain, and Dobruzha. Vassal clients held the Serbian regions—Bosnia, Raška, Zeta, Trebinje, Zahumlje, and Srem—in Samuil's name, while the largest Serbian state—Duklja—was returned to a freed vassal client in-law, Jovan Vladimir, after his political marriage to Samuil's daughter Kosara (or Teodora).<sup>72</sup> Demonstrating the importance Samuil placed on securely holding Dyrrakhion for his extensive empire, he released the captive Ashot Taronites, married him to another of his daughters, Miroslava, and made him governor of the city in John Khryselios's place, trusting that clientage through multiple family ties was more reliable than through a single marriage alone.<sup>73</sup>

Samuil continued using political marriages to bolster his hold on the empire's northwestern regions. Contacts with the Magyars in Pannonia were established as a result of the recent operations south of the middle Danube. Magyar Prince István (Stephen, or Vajk; 997–1038), eager to continue the centralization process begun by his father Prince Géza (940–997), considered a Bulgarian alliance useful in depriving the independent-minded Magyar tribal leaders in lower Pannonia and southern Transylvania of potential Bulgarian assistance. Samuil thought an accord with István would forestall possible Magyar accommodations with Byzantium posing future threats of “two-front” hostilities. A marriage between Samuil's son Gavril Radomir and István's daughter (perhaps named Ilona) was celebrated in 998 and the Magyars evacuated the region of Srem. The strong ties that both parties sought from the marriage alliance never materialized. Gavril Radomir soon tired of his

Magyar wife and later divorced her. Within a few years of the pact, István came to view good relations with Byzantium preferable to the Bulgarian accord because of changes in the Balkan military situation.<sup>74</sup>

Military matters in northern Syria and internal domestic affairs at Constantinople had kept Emperor Basil preoccupied since leaving the Balkans in late 994. Despite the victory won by his lieutenant Ouranos in 996 that nearly resulted in Samuil's willingness to end hostilities, chance events in the following year rendered that situation temporary. The Arab threat in northern Syria prevented Basil from intervening in the Balkans during 998 either to prevent Samuil from reinvigorating Bulgaria's military and political situation or to take advantage of the Bulgarian ruler's campaigning in the peninsula's northwest. His inability to exert a strong imperial presence in the region may have fostered defections to the Bulgarians by some Byzantine provincial thematic officers and regional notables and the appearance of pro-Bulgarian sympathizers in some Byzantine Balkan strongholds.<sup>75</sup> By the opening of 999 Basil faced a rejuvenated and expanded Bulgarian Empire north of his own limited Balkan possessions that posed a serious continuing threat to his retention of their control.

In early spring 999 Basil opened negotiations with the Fatimids in Syria while he remained in Constantinople preparing a campaign against the Bulgarians. As he had in 986, Basil planned to strike at Sredets, occupy the Sofia Basin, and use that "central position" as a springboard for recapturing all of the former post-971 Byzantine territories lost to the Bulgarians. In 999 (or 1000) Basil led his now proficient and disciplined professional army northwestward up the Diagonal highway to Philippopolis, which he established as his operational base under the command of the patrician Theodorokanos. He then advanced through the Sredna Gora passes and into the Sofia Basin. Although resistance may have been stiff, Basil's men quickly took Sredets and captured a number of the surrounding satellite fortresses in the region. Those victories constituted a strategic turning point in the conflict between the two competing empires, shifting the military scales in favor of Byzantium. With the Sofia Basin securely controlled after a swift campaign, Basil effectively cut Samuil's domains in two, laying bare each half to punishing military operations at his choosing.<sup>76</sup>

Basil did not remain long in his newly conquered territory. Affairs in the east had taken a dire turn and his presence there was required. Theodorokanos was transferred to Sredets as commander in the

Sofia Basin and another general, Nikephoros Xiphias, assigned to Philippopolis. When Basil set off for Syria, command of the Balkan forces remaining behind was divided between those two officers as a hedge against either one consolidating sole control over a united European army while he was away.<sup>77</sup> They were charged with continuing operations against Bulgarian possessions in the eastern Balkans during Basil's absence. The following year, 1000 (or 1001), Theodorokanos and Xiphias launched a combined assault on Bulgaria's Danubian holdings. The Byzantine offensive revealed that Samuil's concerns about the Danubian and Dobrudzhan *bolyari's* loyalty had been justified. With the object of their traditional fealty—Krum's dynasty—ended and replaced by a far off individual whom they hardly knew, the eastern Bulgarians offered weak opposition to the Byzantine attack. Preslav, Pliska, and Pereyaslavets soon fell. After garrisons were installed in the regions' captured fortresses to keep watch over the surrounding locales, the rest of the victorious Byzantine troops were withdrawn to their bases. The Byzantine commanders deemed the lower Danube secure. As a result of the campaign, the Danubian Plain east of the Iskür River and all of Dobrudzha were lost to Samuil by the time the Byzantine troops returned to Sredets and Philippopolis.<sup>78</sup>

While his European commanders successfully neutralized the Bulgarian hold on the lower Danube, Emperor Basil solidified Byzantium's borders in the east by signing a 10-year peace with the Fatimids in early 1001. He then returned to the Balkans with his veteran *tagmata* and the Varangians, determined to take advantage of his favorable strategic position by striking Samuil in northern Greece and southern Macedonia, using Thessaloniki as his base of operations. With the *tagmata*, Varangians, elements of Thessaloniki's garrison, and some professional local and Anatolian thematic troops, Basil drove into Samuil's holdings in the regions surrounding the city.

The source record for Basil's 1001 campaign is sketchy and no reliable chronology can be discerned.<sup>79</sup> Basil apparently commenced operations by attacking Beroia. Before any serious siege effort was undertaken, Dobromir, the fortress commander and husband of Samuil's niece, was enticed to surrender the town and defect to the Byzantines, for which Basil rewarded him with the title of provincial governor. Another Bulgarian stronghold located 40 miles (64 km) north of Thessaloniki, Kolydros (m: Kalindria), resisted the Byzantines' assaults. On realizing that no relief force would come to his aid, Dimitür Tihon

(or Teikhonas), the local commander, contacted Basil requesting he and his men be permitted to evacuate Kolydros with their arms and retreat to central Macedonia in return for handing over the place. Basil agreed. Serbia, captured by the Bulgarians in 989, proved more difficult for Basil. Its commander Nikulitsa thwarted the initial siege operations against his position. Determined to take Serbia despite the Bulgarians' effective resistance, Basil intensified the siege efforts, ultimately capturing the fortress with its garrison. The seized Bulgarians were deported to Boleron, a region along the Aegean coast in Western Thrace between the mouths of the Mesta and Maritsa rivers, and a Byzantine garrison was installed. Nikulitsa soon escaped captivity and rejoined Samuil, who then attempted to regain Serbia but was repulsed. Later, Nikulitsa was again seized in a Byzantine ambush, sent to Constantinople, and imprisoned. He afterward was released and granted the title of *patrikios* by Basil.<sup>80</sup>

Basil followed his capture of Serbia by expelling Samuil's troops manning scattered fortified positions in northern Thessaly and rebuilding fortresses in the region that the Bulgarians previously had dismantled. Byzantine garrisons were mounted in those strongholds considered strategically important and the prisoners taken were resettled, once again, in Boleron. Having brought all former southern Macedonian themes and northern Thessaly back under Byzantine authority, Basil turned northward for an advance (his first) into Samuil's homeland territory. His objective was Voden, an important town located on the *Via Egnatia* and a long-standing Bulgarian administrative and ecclesiastical center in Macedonia. Situated on a steep crag, Voden was a difficult fortress to take by storm or siege. Despite the stronghold's natural defenses and its garrison's dogged resistance, Basil's siege operations succeeded. Voden's defenders met the same fate as their defeated compatriots in other fortresses captured by Basil—they were resettled in Boleron—and a significant Byzantine garrison took control of the town. The Bulgarians' captive commander Dragshan (or Draxanos), however, successfully petitioned Basil for permission to reside in Thessaloniki rather than Western Thrace, from which he later made a number of unsuccessful attempts to rejoin Samuil.<sup>81</sup>

By the onset of winter in late 1001, Basil had restored Byzantine control over most Balkan territories held by the empire after 971. Clearing the Bulgarians from former imperial holdings was a welcome development, but securing the border with Bulgaria formed by those reacquisitions against renewed Bulgarian attacks remained problematic. Unlike their compatriots in the Danubian regions, Samuil's western *bolyari* and

troops offered stout resistance in southern Macedonia and Thessaly, displaying little sign of willingly accepting peaceful coexistence with Byzantium despite the occasional defection among the *bolyari*.

In 1002 Basil launched an offensive to capture the northern Bulgarian fortress at Vidin on the Danube. Doing so would open the middle Danube to his control and place Samuil's core Macedonian holdings in a vice between Byzantine forces operating from Danubian bases and those stationed in the Thessalian and southern Macedonian fortresses, thus intimidating Samuil against offensive actions directed at Byzantium's border territories. In addition, an imperial presence on the middle Danube would bring Basil into direct contact with the Magyars and open possibilities for crafting a mutual alliance to further cow Samuil.

Basil spent early 1002 concentrating his forces and stockpiling supplies in the Sofia Basin for the push against Vidin. When all was ready, probably in early April, he marched northward through the Balkan Mountains by way of the Iskŭr River gorge, debouched onto the western Danubian Plain, and advanced northwestward on his objective. The regional Bulgarian troops retreated before him into the protective confines of Vidin's fortifications, which Basil swiftly invested and commenced siege operations. Word of the Byzantine Danubian offensive soon reached Samuil, who realized he had little chance of breaking the siege of his northern-most citadel through direct action. The sheer distance involved in transferring his main force from Macedonia to Vidin's vicinity would lay his southern borders, stripped of their effective defenders, open to Byzantine assaults from Thessaloniki and Voden and endanger Ohrid and Prespa. Moreover, pitched battles were chancy affairs under any circumstances, but confronting the enemy in open battle so far to the north magnified the risk of defeat, and such an outcome could prove catastrophic. Samuil therefore launched a daring, alternative diversionary maneuver intended to pry the Byzantines away from Vidin.

By the end of July or early August Samuil marshaled a large body of warriors in the lower Struma valley for a lightning raid-in-force through Western Thrace and into Thrace Proper, aimed at Adrianople. By cutting the Byzantines' line of communication on the Diagonal highway and raising havoc in their Strymon and Macedonian themes, he hoped Basil would be constrained to raise the siege of Vidin and retire from Bulgaria's northern territories to repair the damage inflicted by those actions. Samuil's raiders swept through Western Thrace, encountering little opposition since the first-line thematic troops were participating in

the Vidin operation. The Bulgarians arrived outside Adrianople on 15 August, the Orthodox religious feast of the Assumption, and the inhabitants were preoccupied with the annual fair held in honor of the holy-day. Unaware of the Bulgarians' close proximity, and their guard relaxed because the city was far from the frontier and thus thought secure, the population was taken completely by surprise and offered little resistance to Samuil's men when they burst on the scene. After a brief period of mayhem, during which Adrianople was thoroughly despoiled, Samuil ordered the booty gathered and retired to his Macedonian lands as quickly as he had advanced. The Adrianople strike was Samuil's last known major offensive action.<sup>82</sup>

As a raid garnering captives and plunder at little cost, the Adrianople operation was a success. As a grand tactical maneuver intended to lift the siege of Vidin, it was a failure. With abundant stores of supplies carried by his army, warehoused in Sredets, and available by way of the lower Danube, Basil safely ignored the Bulgarians' thrust at his distant overland line of communication. While probably ordering defensive adjustments in Byzantium's border themes to prevent the recurrence of any similar incident, he persisted in besieging Vidin in the face of ongoing stout resistance from its garrison, who seem to have devised some countermeasure for defusing the effectiveness of his most fearsome weapon, "Greek fire." Enjoying plentiful supplies and willing to extend operations beyond the traditional close of campaigning season, Basil continued the siege into the early days of winter. Sometime in December 1002, after eight months of punishing investment and the looming threat of starvation, the Bulgarian garrison in Vidin finally surrendered. In consequence, Basil achieved his strategic goals for the campaign. The middle Danube was opened to him as far as Srem. He now had Samuil's core Macedonian possessions confined within a pincers of Byzantine-controlled territories to their north, east, and south, and was positioned to threaten Samuil's continued influence over his Serbian vassal clients in the Balkans' northwest. Lastly, direct contact with the Pannonian Magyars north of the Danube was opened.<sup>83</sup>

After wintering at Vidin, in spring 1003 Basil launched a daring thrust into hostile Bulgarian territory in northern Macedonia. Crossing the nearby Balkan Mountains below the Iron Gates, he pushed southward through rugged country, following the Timok River valley to Naissos, a town on the Diagonal highway that he swiftly took. He then continued his southward advance along the Morava River, using the old Roman



Vardar-Morava “Imperial route,” heading for the fortress of Skopje, located in a north Macedonian mountain basin. Samuil, informed of Basil’s incursion, gathered a large force of warriors and rushed to the vicinity of the threatened stronghold, establishing a camp on the south bank of the Vardar River close to the town. Basil’s force soon arrived at the river and encamped on its north bank near to the Bulgarians. Incredulously, as he had at the Sperkheios seven years earlier, Samuil placed his trust in a deep river to provide protection for his encampment instead of in entrenchments, and, just as at the Sperkheios, his confidence proved misplaced. Basil’s scouts discovered a suitable fording site and the Byzantine troops soon were across the Vardar, formed for battle on its southern bank, and launched on the unprotected Bulgarian camp. What followed was hardly a battle. As the Byzantines closed on them, most Bulgarian warriors, including Samuil, grabbed whatever belongings they could and fled without mounting much resistance, abandoning the encampment and everything they could not carry away. Samuil’s tent and most of his personal campaign belongings were lost. The fortress commander at nearby Skopje, a certain Roman-Simeon, shaken by the miserable performance of his ruler’s army, quickly surrendered the fortress to Basil in return for a title and other rewards.<sup>84</sup>

Following Samuil’s rout and Skopje’s fall, Basil chose not to strike farther into Macedonia’s interior against the Bulgarians’ heartland regions of Ohrid and Prespa. He instead installed a garrison in the captured fortress and turned his forces northeastward, intent on clearing the Bulgarians from the rugged upper Struma River regions that abutted the Sofia Basin. Doing so would remove enemy threats to his strategically important base at Sredets, render Bulgarian possession of the Struma River valley vulnerable to attack from two directions, and further confine Samuil’s territories to central Macedonia and the mountainous Serbian-inhabited regions of the Balkans’ northwest. The key to controlling the upper Struma districts was the formidable fortress of Pernik, located 20 miles (32 km) west-southwest of Sredets and the nexus for a network of smaller regional forts. Surrounded by thick stone walls and towers, it crowned a high, rocky hill overlooking the primary branch of the Struma’s sources and protected the intersection of two regionally important roadways—one linking Sredets to northern Macedonia and Skopje by way of Velbuzhd (m: Kyustendil), and the other, which began at Pernik, running the length of the Struma valley southward to the Aegean Sea east of Thessaloniki.<sup>85</sup>

Driving up the road from Skopje to Sredets, Basil first reduced the Bulgarian fortress at Velbŭzhd before settling in to tackle Pernik. The attacks he unleashed against its walls were costly and futile and its naturally impregnable hilltop position foiled his siege efforts. The regional *bolyar* leader Krakra, commanding Pernik's garrison, personally proved as resistant to Byzantine pressure as were the stronghold's fortifications. When storm and siege operations failed to force Pernik's fall, Basil resorted to offering Krakra enticements to surrender the fortress. The gifted and committed Bulgarian rebuffed all flattery and offers of titles and wealth proffered by the stymied Byzantine, stoutly persisting in defending his position. Frustrated both militarily and diplomatically, Basil decided to cut his losses and terminated the protracted operation. He marched off to Sredets and then to Philippopolis, eventually retiring to Constantinople before the year was out.<sup>86</sup>

Because of Yahya of Antioch's statement in his *History* that the warfare with Bulgaria initiated by Basil in 1001 continued for four years, scholars accept that it must have ended sometime in 1005 with the Byzantine emperor victorious.<sup>87</sup> If so, the details of the fighting during the period separating Basil's retirement from Pernik in 1003 and 1005 remain unknown. Judging from Basil's actions following his victory on the Vardar and the capture of Skopje, Byzantine operations during that time must have been undertaken to consolidate control of territories regained through 1003 and to exert strategic pressure on the Bulgarians along the new common border created by their re-conquest. Of Samuil's activities during the same period, nothing certain is known.<sup>88</sup> Only one documented event of note may have occurred in 1005 and, if it did so, signaled the close of this period's hostilities.

Since 998 Bulgarian control of Dyrrakhion was in the hands of Samuil's Armenian son-in-law Ashot, husband of Miroslava and former captive. Once a loyal Byzantine subject, Ashot came to consider the material benefits available in Byzantium preferable to those proffered by Bulgaria and convinced his Bulgarian princess-wife to concur. After arriving in the city, he ingratiated himself with John Khryselios and the heads of Dyrrakhion's other leading merchant families, perhaps agreeing to share governance with them. Those merchants apparently experienced a decline in commercial profits after aligning with Samuil, whose empire they came to consider provincial and economically limited in comparison with Byzantium. By 1005, with Byzantine fortunes in the Balkans

on the rise, Ashot, Khryselios, and other merchant leaders, disgruntled over their material and economic situations, concocted a joint plot to remedy their shared woes. Surreptitious contact was made with one of Byzantium's Adriatic naval themes and an arrangement struck to have a ship anchor off the coast near Dyrrakhion and transport Ashot and his wife to Constantinople. The Armenian defector carried with him a letter to Basil from Khryselios offering to deliver the city back to the empire in return for the elevation of his two sons and himself to patrician status. Basil was delighted. A fleet was dispatched to Dyrrakhion to accept the merchants' renewed fealty, a Byzantine garrison was installed, Khryselios and his sons received their desired reward, Ashot was bestowed the high rank of *magistros*, and Miroslava, the daughter of a *tsar*, was made a *zoste patrikia* (Gr: "girded patrician"), an exclusively female honor representing the highest Byzantine rank attainable by a woman other than an empress. Basil's generosity displayed the importance he placed on regaining Dyrrakhion for furthering Byzantium's interests in the Adriatic and his recognition of the converse blow it struck at Samuil's Bulgaria.<sup>89</sup>

Traditional historical scholarship holds that Basil was unflinchingly set on exterminating the Bulgarian Empire and, commencing in 1001, pursuing unrelenting, year-round warfare to achieve that goal. Such a view lies more within the realm of hypothesis than documented reality. The source record for the Bulgarian-Byzantine military conflict virtually is silent for the period between Basil's recovery of Dyrrakhion in 1005(?) and the operations that he initiated in 1014. The traditional interpretation is based on two statements made by two Byzantine authors—Skylitzes and Michael Psellos. In summarizing the decade-long period between the above two events, Skylitzes merely remarked that Basil "continued to invade Bulgaria every year without interruption, laying waste to everything that came to hand." Psellos, in a general characterization of Basil's military approach, stated that he "did not follow the customary procedure of other emperors, setting out at the middle of spring and returning home at the end of summer. For him the time to return was when the task in hand was accomplished."<sup>90</sup> Since the traditional interpretation accepts the premise that Basil's objective in the Balkans was the destruction of Bulgaria, the two above source statements seemingly justify the conclusion that, starting in 1001, Basil waged unremitting warfare until a victorious conclusion was won in 1018, despite the near total lack of corroborating evidence for the period spanning 1005 and 1014.<sup>91</sup>

Given the gap in the detailed source record, a brief review of Basil's known anti-Bulgarian military operations prior to 1005 may prove informative.

The disastrous 986 Sredets campaign was as much an attempt by Basil to display supreme military authority in the face of magnate opposition as it was to defeat the Bulgarians. Its grand tactical objective was to divide the Bulgarian Empire in two, laying it open to assaults in detail, but the effort ended in defeat. When Basil next fought the Bulgarians (991–994), his offensives were restricted to reconsolidating control of Byzantine territories in the vicinity of Thessaloniki that had previously been lost to his enemies. After returning to the Balkans in 999, he repeated and achieved the objectives originally sought by his failed 986 Sredets campaign, permitting him to neutralize Samuil's hold on the lower Danubian regions (1000) and to regain possession of southern Macedonia and northern Thessaly (1001). His successful Vidin (1002) and Skopje (1003) campaigns (which resulted in his first conquests of strictly Bulgarian possessions) and the recovery of Dyrrakhion (1005?) reduced the Bulgarian Empire largely to central Macedonia and the northwestern Balkans, placing it into a vice of Byzantine territories on all sides except to its northwest.

Viewed collectively, Basil's Balkan military efforts through 1005 demonstrate that his primary concerns were regaining all of Byzantium's post-971 possessions, securing the borders created by doing so against further Bulgarian encroachment, and acquiring dependable control of all major Balkan communication lines (*i.e.*, the Danube, the Diagonal highway, the *Via Egnatia*, and the Vardar-Morava route) outside of Samuil's core holdings. His additional territorial gains in the middle Danubian and northern Macedonian regions were used to pressure Samuil to remain within his own borders, and perhaps accept an accommodation with Byzantium, rather than to serve as springboards for some definitive invasion to end the Bulgarian Empire. This contention appears to enjoy explicit support in Basil's decision not to push against Samuil's heartland districts immediately after the way was opened for such an effort by the total rout of the Bulgarian army at the Vardar and the surrender of Skopje (1003). It reasonably can be hypothesized that Basil nurtured no longstanding intention to conquer Bulgaria until events after 1014 offered him that possibility.<sup>92</sup>

Such a conclusion has led some recent scholars to speculate that, in 1005 or thereabout, Basil arrived at an arrangement with Samuil ending

blatant hostilities that generally held for the subsequent decade. Perhaps a truce or even a treaty was struck, the evidence for which may have been expediently erased from the Byzantine source record to harmonize with the propaganda image of Basil as “conqueror” fashioned in Byzantium following the fall of Bulgaria in 1018. Defeat at Sperkheios in 996 had weakened Samuil’s position of leadership within Bulgaria and led him to an attempted accommodation with Basil. The Vardar fiasco in 1003 may have spawned similar developments. Because the extant sources are silent, there is no way of judging the extent or seriousness of internal Bulgarian disarray that resulted from the Vardar debacle, but some probably emerged. Samuil could have been rendered amenable to opening negotiations with Basil to dampen Byzantium’s military pressures so that he could reconsolidate authority over his shaken underlings. For his part, Basil, satisfied with his gains in the Balkans to date, may have viewed reaching an agreement terminating major hostilities as welcome relief for his empire’s treasury. His Balkan and eastern campaigns had been costly and far from profitable. A reprieve in major military expenses therefore would have represented a fiscal godsend. With both imperial belligerents thus seemingly disposed toward ending outright conflict, their forging a truce or treaty around 1005 lies within the realm of distinct possibility.<sup>93</sup>

Immediately following his comment regarding uninterrupted warfare during the period, Skylitzes noted that Samuil “could do nothing in open country nor could he oppose the emperor in formal battle. He was shattered on all fronts and his own forces were declining.”<sup>94</sup> Some recent scholars consider this statement, in combination with his previous remark, evidence for continued fighting throughout the period separating Basil’s recovery of Dyrrakhion and his 1014 campaign, rejecting the notion of a truce or treaty having been struck. If such were the case, the hostilities must have been low level since no engagements of note merited notice in the extant record. Basil may have ordered his European commanders to conduct annual raids with limited objectives, primarily to maintain combat proficiency among the troops, and he may have led some of those himself. As for the Bulgarians, they might generally have resorted to guerrilla tactics in both resisting the Byzantines’ efforts and conducting their own restricted operations. Limited raiding and hit-and-run tactics were characteristic military activities conducted by adversaries along fluid common borders during periods of major offensive inactivity. That the situation endured for close to a decade would indicate that Samuil and Basil were content with upholding the *status quo* established

by 1005 until circumstances arose permitting a change in military posture.<sup>95</sup>

Major hostilities between Bulgaria and Byzantium recommenced in 1014 when Emperor Basil launched an offensive against Samuil's positions in the Struma valley regions of southeastern Macedonia. His motivations for doing so are debatable, given the uncertainty surrounding the military situation during the decade preceding the outbreak. If a treaty between the two empires had been struck, it may have expired in 1014 since the Byzantines commonly negotiated such accords on a 10-year basis. That period of relative peace would have provided Basil time to replenish his treasury for renewing military efforts once any treaty's terms ended. Just as likely, the low-level border fighting conducted by the two adversaries may have progressively escalated until Basil, exasperated by continued Bulgarian resistance, deemed it necessary to resort to a full-blown effort to force Samuil's acceptance of a definitive accommodation in Byzantium's favor. Skylitzes provided tentative evidence that, by 1014, the Bulgarians recovered some of the important border strongholds (such as Beroia and Sredets) lost to Basil before 1003. Perhaps the 1014 Byzantine military action simply began as the latest in an extended string of border raids that circumstances blew into an unforeseen major offensive. Whatever the reasons, the combat initiated in 1014 by Basil raised the curtain on the final act in the protracted Bulgarian-Byzantine military struggle for hegemony in the Balkans.<sup>96</sup>

In summer 1014 Basil led a strike against Bulgarian border positions in the lower Struma regions to the northeast of Thessaloniki. Advancing from Constantinople, he first established a base of operations at Mosynopolis (m: Komotini), situated on the *Via Egnatia* in the Boleron region, and then pushed to the Struma River lowlands near Serres, where he turned northward into Bulgarian territory lying beyond the narrow Rupil Pass cut by the Struma, separating the Pirin and Belasitsa (or Belasica) mountains. Just on the far side of the pass, the Struma was met by a tributary flowing from the west, the Strumeshnitsa (or Strumica) River, which carved out a long, narrow valley between the Belasitsa Mountains, to its south, and the Ograzhden (or Ograzden) Mountains, to its north, known to the Byzantines as the Kimbalonga ("Long Plain"). Approximately midway through its course, the valley narrowed to a small pass between those mountains that had acquired the name of the "Key" (B: "Klyuch"; Gr: "Kleidion") because the Kimbalonga provided access into the heart of Macedonia by way of a road running

from the Struma valley, through the town of Strumitsa, and eventually to Skopje. Byzantine forces had made use of the valley during previous raiding operations, so that, when Basil's troops marched westward along the Strumeshnitsa, they found their advance blocked by a manned line of strong Bulgarian earthworks at Klyuch, straddling the pass between the two flanking mountain chains.<sup>97</sup>

Samuil's border scouts had informed him of the Byzantine moves in the lower Struma region. In hopes of deflecting the blow, he dispatched the *bolyar* commander David Nestoritsa and a large body of warriors to conduct diversionary raids in the vicinity of Thessaloniki while he led his personal retainers and their retinues to Strumitsa, where they could act as a reserve for the troops manning the works at Klyuch. Nestoritsa swept down the Vardar River valley and commenced threatening Thessaloniki's surroundings. The Byzantine *doux* of the city, Theophylact Botaneiates, soon brought Nestoritsa and his followers to battle. Somewhere near the city Botaneiates's large garrison force resoundingly defeated Nestoritsa's raiders. The beaten Bulgarians retired into the southern Macedonian mountains to regroup, and Botaneiates led a contingent of Thessaloniki's *themata* northward to join Basil's force in the Kimbalonga.<sup>98</sup>

While Botaneiates dealt with Nestoritsa, Basil was having problems before Samuil's fortifications at Klyuch. A series of bloody frontal assaults were repulsed by the entrenched Bulgarians and produced only rising Byzantine casualty counts. The resulting stalemate led Basil, once news of the successful outcome at Thessaloniki reached him, to call on Botaneiates for assistance in forcing the Bulgarian works blocking his way. Before those reinforcements arrived either a frustrated Basil or his able general from Philippopolis, Nikephoros Xiphias, knowing their Herodotos, decided to attempt a turning movement *à la* Xerxes at Thermopylai.<sup>99</sup> Scouting parties were dispatched to seek out existing tracks in the Belasitsa range suitable for moving troops into the rear of the obstructing earthworks. One duly was found. Xiphias then led a strong detachment of men into the mountains using that route while Basil carried out demonstrations-in-force to the Bulgarians' front (Fig. 7.3).

On 29 July the Byzantine flanking troops streamed down Belasitsa's slopes, screaming battle cries, and fell on the rear of the Bulgarian defenders at the Klyuch ramparts, taking them completely by surprise. Simultaneously, Basil launched a frontal attack against the emplacements as soon as he heard the shouts of Xiphias's men and swiftly broke

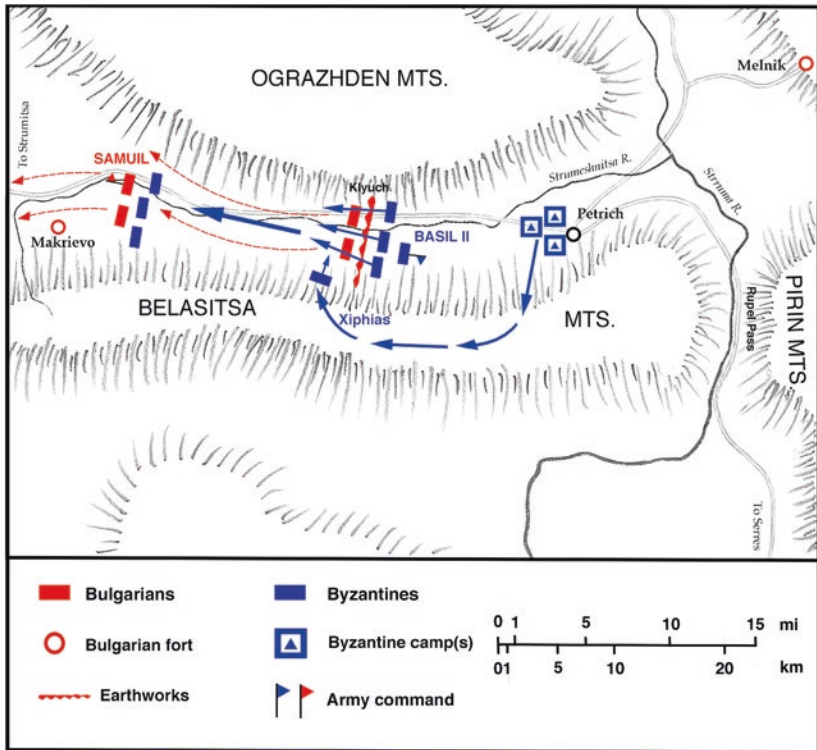


Fig. 7.3 Battle of Klyuch Pass, 29 July 1014

through the defenses. Bulgarian resistance collapsed and the defeated, utterly disorganized and demoralized warriors made off as best they could, fleeing westward toward Strumitsa in search of succor with the Byzantines in close pursuit. Desperate to stem the tide of defeat, Samuil led his reserves out of Strumitsa and advanced to meet the Byzantine onslaught. The two sides collided in renewed fighting a bit west of Klyuch near the Bulgarian fort at Makrievio (Gr: Matzoukis), in which Basil's troops again emerged victorious. Many Bulgarians were killed and more were captured. It was said that Samuil escaped those fates only through the bravery of his son and co-commander Gavril Radomir, who fought off Byzantine troopers threatening his unhorsed father, pulled him onto his own steed, and then sped him out of the fray to safety.



Samuil eventually made his way to Prilep, where he attempted to gather more warriors to guard the road from the Kimbalonga to Ohrid. The Bulgarian battle survivors fled to Strumitsa, where Gavril Radomir rallied and assumed command over them in the absence of his father. Having driven the Bulgarians from the field, Basil reduced the fort at Makrievio and tentatively advanced to the neighborhood of Strumitsa.<sup>100</sup>

Although a solid Byzantine victory, the battle at Klyuch Pass was hardly the decisive engagement claimed by later Byzantine authors, quite specifically Skylitzes, whose portrayal traditionally has been accepted by scholars. Despite Skylitzes's triumphal account of the battle, however, he went on to relate that Bulgarian resistance to Basil's military efforts against them persisted for close to four years after Klyuch. His own record of events transpiring immediately following the victory belied his assertion of its decisiveness.

Basil did not make any serious effort to capture the defeated Bulgarians' stronghold of Strumitsa. He may have hoped that the costly defeats already inflicted on them at Thessaloniki and Klyuch would convince their ruler to embrace a definitive accommodation ending hostilities on terms favorable to Byzantium, perhaps using his Bulgarian captives from those engagements as bargaining chips. He also could have been waiting for Botaneiates to arrive from Thessaloniki with much needed reinforcements for replenishing the losses incurred at Klyuch. After defeating Nestoritsa, Botaneiates set out to join his emperor in Kimbalonga by way of the existing Thessaloniki-Strumitsa road, the most direct route, which entered the Strumitsa region of Macedonia after traversing the passes separating the Belasitsa and Plavush (or Plavuš) mountains.

Basil had sent the *doux* orders to destroy all obstructions erected by the Bulgarians in the passes encountered on his march so that the road to Thessaloniki would be open should circumstances require using that route. As Botaneiates worked his way through the passes, burning or dismantling the Bulgarians' defensive works as he advanced, he was watched by Bulgarian warriors hovering in cover on the heights above the roadway. Those troops may have constituted Nestoritsa's regrouped force, a detachment from Strumitsa led by Gavril Radomir, or perhaps both. The Bulgarians waited until the Byzantines entered an exceedingly narrow defile before falling on them in a surprise assault. Arrows, javelins, and stones showered down on the unsuspecting Byzantines crowded in the mountain corridor, reportedly so closely packed that they could not

make effective use of their weapons when the Bulgarians followed their missile barrage by springing to the attack. Many Byzantines died, including Botaneiates, who, according to a later account, was disemboweled by Gavril Radomir wielding a spear. Most of the survivors fled back to Thessaloniki while others eventually found their way to Basil's force near Strumitsa bringing word of the disastrous affair.<sup>101</sup>

Supposedly motivated by revenge for the defeat and death of his close associate Botaneiates, Basil ordered all of his Bulgarian prisoners (said to have numbered 14,000–15,000 men by later Byzantine sources) blinded, separating them into groups of 100 and then sending them back to Samuil in Prilep, each group led by one captive who was spared an eye for the purpose. When those unfortunates stumbled into Samuil's presence on 4 October, he was so overcome with shock at the sight of his mutilated army that he immediately suffered a seizure, from which he was briefly revived before slipping into an irreversible coma and dying two days later (6 October). The grisly act contributed to Basil posthumously earning the honorary title of "Boulgaroktonos" (Gr: "Bulgar-Slayer").<sup>102</sup>

The veracity of the blinding story can be questioned. The most obvious issue is the number of Bulgarian captives blinded at Basil's orders. The figures found in the Byzantine sources would have represented nearly half of the Bulgarians' total potential field army in Macedonia, conceivably some 33,000 men.<sup>103</sup> After factoring in additional Bulgarian casualties sustained at Thessaloniki and Klyuch, Bulgarian losses would have reached well over 50% of their total strength. Such a high level of casualties, combined with the demoralization that certainly would have emerged among the survivors, make it highly unlikely that the Bulgarians could have trounced Botaneiates immediately following the Klyuch disaster while continuing to hold Strumitsa against Basil's victorious army and thereafter persisting in their military defiance for another four years, even if levy replacements during that period are accounted. The inescapable conclusion, therefore, is that the Bulgarian force overcome at Klyuch was not an "army" but a detachment of border guards garrisoning the fort who were reinforced by Samuil's retinue, and that the number of blinded captives in the sources was greatly exaggerated, with the actual figure probably ranging in the hundreds or low thousands, at most.<sup>104</sup>

If the blinding story is accepted as more fictional than factual, then Samuil's death as a result of the incident, as portrayed in the Byzantine

accounts, must also be questioned. By the time of the Klyuch battle, Samuil was elderly—perhaps 70 years old—and the tale of his rescue during the battle by his son’s heroic actions may have been an allusion to his age. After a life spent in near constant military campaigning, with its attendant physical exertions and bodily injuries, Samuil’s harrowing experience at Klyuch may have taken a decisive toll on his body. Although he remained steadfastly defiant in the face of Basil’s military and diplomatic pressures to force his acceptance of Byzantine suzerainty (which could have included Basil sending him batches of blinded prisoners to encourage his compliance), Samuil’s physical wellbeing most likely was in decline by the time he reached Prilep after the battle. Thus his death probably resulted more from natural causes—a heart attack or stroke brought on by his recent combat exertions—than from the sight of returned blinded prisoners of war.<sup>105</sup>

Long before news of Samuil’s demise reached him three months after Klyuch, Basil had decided not to push farther into central Macedonia. Following Botaneiates’s defeat, he retired to the Struma valley, where he decided to capture Melnik, a primary Bulgarian border fortress guarding the lower Struma region, before returning to his base at Mosynopolis. Perhaps he sought to increase pressure on Samuil to accept a diplomatic settlement favorable to Byzantine interests. Taking Melnik would open most of the Struma valley to Byzantium, isolate Bulgarian forces in the upper Struma regions around Pernik, and further tighten the strategic vice on the Bulgarians’ central Macedonian holdings.

Melnik fortress, nexus of a regional network of smaller forts, sat in the western foothills of the Pirin Mountains on a stony eminence located in the midst of jagged sandstone crags cut through by a maze of runoff gullies. The broken terrain rendered Melnik difficult to attack. On arriving before the bastion, Basil recognized the difficulties involved in assaulting or besieging it and resorted instead to diplomacy. He sent his trusted chamberlain Sergios, a man renowned for talented rhetoric, into the fortress under a flag of truce to win over the garrison with promises of rich rewards. After extended argumentation, Sergios persuaded the defenders to lay down their arms and surrender the fortress to Basil, who thereafter duly bestowed the promised riches. Bulgarian garrisons in the surrounding forts followed suite. Once Melnik’s defenders were disarmed, a Byzantine garrison was installed in their place and Basil, considering the campaign concluded, retired to Mosynopolis with the bulk of his army.<sup>106</sup>

In early October Tsar Samuil died (from whatever cause). His first-born son Gavril Radomir laid claim to the succession and was proclaimed *tsar*, presumably on 15 October.<sup>107</sup> By all accounts, Gavril Radomir (1014–1015) was a brave, vigorous, strong, and hardened warrior who had long served as his father's chief military subordinate, functioning as his second-in-command and protector in battle. Despite being experienced and talented in warfare, Gavril Radomir also was described by Skylitzes as being “sadly inferior to him [Samuil] in wisdom and understanding.”<sup>108</sup> This negative characterization may have been a veiled reference to problems among the Bulgarian *bolyari* after Samuil's death. Dynastic loyalty appears to have become divided between those supporting the deceased *tsar's* direct heir and those backing Ivan Vladislav, the lone descendent of Samuil's murdered brother Aron. Initially, members of the former clique, probably the *bolyar* majority, had their candidate installed as *tsar*, but Ivan Vladislav's followers, perhaps a significant *bolyar* minority, remained unhappy with the outcome and Gavril Radomir proved incapable of winning their trust or the fealty of their leader. Quite possibly some *bolyari* simply lost their enthusiasm for continuing military efforts against Byzantium and began placing their personal self-interests above dynastic loyalty. Thus the divisiveness within the Bulgarian leadership, and not the military consequences of Klyuch and the subsequent blinding episode, probably brought about the Bulgarian Empire's fall, ending the long Balkan hegemonic struggle in Byzantium's favor.<sup>109</sup>

The news of Samuil's death reached Basil in Mosynopolis on 24 October. Realizing the transition in Bulgarian leadership would be accompanied by a brief period of instability, and despite the lateness of the season, he immediately mustered his troops and marched to Thessaloniki, intent on launching an intimidating show-in-force in Bulgarian territory while the time was ripe. From Thessaloniki, he advanced to Voden and then pushed westward onto the Bitola (Gr: Pelagonian) Plain deep within south-central Macedonia, meeting little organized resistance. To pacify the local population, Basil issued strict orders forbidding looting in the villages encountered on the march, the only exception being the sacking and burning of Gavril Radomir's personal residence at Bitola after Byzantine troops arrived in that town. From Bitola, Basil dispatched swift strikes against the Bulgarian fortresses of Prilep (Gr: Prilapon) and Shtip (or Štip; Gr: Stypeion), both of which fell to his troops. Immediately after capturing those strongholds, he withdrew his forces from Bitola and Prilep, crossing the Cherna

(or Crna) River by rafts and inflated animal bladders, and by 9 January 1015 they had retired to Thessaloniki by way of Voden.<sup>110</sup>

The extent of Bulgarian opposition to Basil's moves in south-central and eastern Macedonia remains unknown because of the sources' silence. Nor are Basil's motives for the operations clear for a similar reason. It seems that outright conquest of Bulgarian territory was not part of his agenda since he retreated to Byzantine territory despite having taken three important enemy strongholds without encountering concerted opposition. Perhaps seasonal inclement weather in Macedonia's mountainous terrain helped account for his actions. Just as likely, however, the operations' goal was the intimidation of the new *tsar* and his *bolyari* in hopes of rendering them amenable to accepting a Byzantine protectorate over their state. By attacking, capturing, and then relinquishing control of the fortresses (possibly with the exception of Shtip), Basil sent them a strong message proclaiming Byzantium's dominant military presence in the Balkans: He could strike Bulgaria whenever and wherever he pleased and the Bulgarians were powerless to prevent him from doing so. Basil's gambit apparently made the desired impression because Gavril Radomir soon after offered to accept Byzantine suzerainty on terms that remain unknown.<sup>111</sup>

Skylitzes portrayed the new Bulgarian *tsar's* peace offering as specious. At the time he made it, however, Gavril Radomir could have been serious in his motivations. His *bolyari* probably were broken into factions and his position on the throne unsteady. He needed time to solidify enough authority to stabilize Bulgaria's military situation. In offering peace terms he hoped to gain a lull in military operations that could assist him in addressing his leadership problems and secure the military capability for both adequate defense of his state and his own future operations against Byzantium. During the respite earned by his diplomatic gambit, Gavril Radomir won a sufficient level of *bolyar* support, since the *Chronicle of the Priest of Duklja* (although not the most reliable of accounts, it is the only extant non-Byzantine, Slavic source treating the period) claimed that he "waged numerous wars against the Greeks... and conquered all the lands as far as Constantinople."<sup>112</sup> Despite the chronicle's obvious exaggerations—Gavril Radomir held the Bulgarian throne for less than a year so he could not have "waged *numerous* wars," nor could he have conquered "*all* the lands" in the Balkans outside of Constantinople—it implied that the Bulgarians recommenced raiding Byzantine territory by early spring 1015 and regained some positions previously lost to Basil.

Confronted by Gavril Radomir's diplomatic ploy and renewed serious Bulgarian raiding, Basil decided to launch a spring offensive against Bulgaria's southern strongholds in early April. Before he could do so, the Bulgarian inhabitants of Voden rose in rebellion and expelled the Byzantine garrison from the fortress. Basil was forced to regain the strategically important bastion before proceeding with his planned offensive. A protracted siege ensued that was successfully resolved only after Basil granted the inhabitants leniency for their actions. Instead of blinding or executing them for sedition, he relocated them to Boleron for resettlement. In replacing the garrison at the fortress, Basil installed a unit of Byzantine light infantry (called *Kontaratoi*, or "Lancers"), who were infamous for their wild and brutal demeanor. To secure the regional corridor leading to south-central Macedonia from Voden, he erected two new forts in the middle of that passage before returning to Thessaloniki.<sup>113</sup>

While Basil was dealing with affairs in Voden, a detached Byzantine force, commanded by Doux Constantine Diogenes and seconded by Nikephoros Xiphias, advanced onto the Moglena Plain north of Voden, which they laid waste before besieging the Bulgarians' regional central stronghold, Müglen. The fortress garrison, led by the *bolyar* Ilitsa (Gr: Elitzes) and Gavril Radomir's *kavhan*, Dometian, mounted such a strong defense that Basil was constrained to quit Thessaloniki and take personal charge of the operations. On arriving at Müglen, he set men to work diverting the course of the Müglenitsa (m: Moglenitza) River, which ran along the outer base of the fortress's ramparts, ultimately exposing their foundations. Sappers, supported by strong cover fire and using protective tortoises, undermined the walls and filled the excavated portions with combustibles. These were set alight, bringing down the overhead stretch of ramparts. Realizing that all was lost once large sections of the walls collapsed, the Bulgarian commanders surrendered the fortress and its garrison. Probably because Boleron could not hold more transplanted Bulgarian settlers, Basil had the most militarily capable captives deported to the Anatolian region of Vaspurakan. The rest were either enslaved or killed. Müglen was razed and burned and the nearby Bulgarian fort of Enotia (m: Notia) was captured and garrisoned, granting Basil control over much of southern Macedonia's Moglena region.<sup>114</sup>

Basil's crushing of the Voden revolt and his destruction of Müglen exacerbated the factional strife among the Bulgarian *bolyari*, permitting Ivan Vladislav and his followers to stage a successful coup that summer.

In early August Tsar Gavril Radomir was assassinated by his cousin during a hunting expedition near Lake Ostrovo (m: Vegoritis). The vengeful Ivan Vladislav (1015–1018), who may have been motivated by blood-feud satisfaction stemming from Samuil's extermination of his family decades earlier as much as by gaining the throne, had Gavril Radomir's wife killed and her eldest son blinded in a purge of opposition to his imperial claims. Although he pronounced himself *tsar*, the extent of his *bolyar* support remains unclear, but it certainly did not approach unanimity and may have ranked below a majority. His unsteady leadership position accounts for Ivan Vladislav dispatching a delegation to Basil in Thessaloniki soon after his bloody coup announcing the change in *tsars* and expressing his willingness to accept Byzantine suzerainty. Because such an outcome harmonized with the goals sought by Basil, some arrangement was rapidly struck, with Basil issuing chrysobulls to Ivan Vladislav promising him imperial recognition and authority over Dyrrakhion in return for his swearing fealty to the Byzantine crown.<sup>115</sup>

Despite the appearances of accord, Basil suspected Ivan Vladislav was playing for time in proffering peace overtures, as had Gavril Radomir earlier. His suspicions apparently were confirmed by a member of the Bulgarian peace embassy, Kavhan Teodor, brother of that Dometian captured at Müglen. Whether Teodor's story of Ivan Vladislav's duplicity was true or he simply acted as part of a *bolyar* faction opposed to the usurper is unclear, but the latter appears most likely. When Teodor declared his submission to Byzantium and offered to assassinate Ivan Vladislav with his own hands, Basil embraced the opportunity. Teodor, together with one of Ivan Vladislav's servants who was privy to the plan and heavily bribed, returned to Bulgaria. His plot soon was uncovered (probably because the servant played a double-dealing role). At a meeting with Ivan Vladislav, the would-be assassin was himself murdered by the Bulgarian ruler. Basil's hand in the matter was obvious, so Ivan Vladislav, convinced that he had been betrayed by his Byzantine partner in the accommodation, mustered as sizeable a force possible and set out for Dyrrakhion in what ultimately proved a futile attempt to make good on Basil's peace donative.<sup>116</sup>

On learning of the foiled assassination and Ivan Vladislav's move toward the Adriatic coast, Basil considered the Bulgarian *tsar* in violation of the recently negotiated agreement. He grasped the chance to strike at Bulgaria's heart in south-central Macedonia while his adversary's troops were concentrated on Dyrrakhion and reopened military operations.

After assembling a large force in Thessaloniki, Basil marched to Voden, from which he sent detachments into the Moglena and Ostrovo districts to reduce fortresses that remained in Bulgarian hands—Sosk (Gr: Soskos; m: Aridaia), in Moglena, and Ostrovo (Gr: Ostrovos; m: Arnissa)—and ravage the countryside. Once both regions were laid waste, Basil advanced onto the Bitola Plain, where his troops repeated their depredations and defeated the opposition encountered. Because Basil now considered all hostile armed Bulgarians rebels in violation of the recent pact forged with Ivan Vladislav, he had those prisoners taken during the operations blinded.<sup>117</sup>

Unlike his previous foray onto the Bitola Plain, Basil did not retreat after ravaging part of the region. He instead pushed westward through the mountainous terrain against the Bulgarians' capital at Ohrid. Sitting on the northeastern shore of Lake Ohrid, the city's landward perimeter was protected by a single curtain wall that began and terminated at edges of the lake to the east and west. The rampart traversed a hill overlooking the civilian settlement from the north and, at its crest, Samuil earlier had erected a strong stone fortress with an internal citadel, in which was located the imperial palace and its attendant structures. On arriving at Ohrid, Basil found the fortress-citadel garrisoned but few Bulgarians manning the perimeter wall, enabling him to enter the civilian-inhabited districts of the city with relative ease. A stand-off then ensued, with the Bulgarian fortress's garrison penned within the fortifications on the hill and Basil, controlling the city's civilian quarters facing the lake shore, reluctant to initiate siege operations because he wished to strike Ivan Vladislav and relieve Dyrrakhion as quickly as possible. Having gathered supplies after plundering Ohrid's civilian quarters, Basil vacated the city with his army and headed for the Adriatic coast, leaving behind a large rearguard contingent, commanded by George Gonitziates and his adjutant Orestes (called "The Prisoner"), with orders to continue overrunning the extensive Bitola Plain.

Not long after Basil left Ohrid for Dyrrakhion, Gonitziates's detachment was lured into a trap in the mountains near Bitola and annihilated by Bulgarian units commanded by an experienced and staunchly anti-Byzantine *bolyar*, Ivats (Gr: Ibatzes). Gonitziates, Orestes, and most of their troops were killed in the action. On receiving word of his rearguard's massacre, and probably also informed that Ivan Vladislav was making no headway against Dyrrakhion, Basil halted his march and reversed direction, intent on avenging the bloody defeat by punishing



Ivats. Despite driving his men hard in pursuit of the enemy force, Basil failed to bring the elusive Bulgarians to battle. They escaped his wrath by melting into the mountainous terrain bordering the Bitola Plain. Unwilling to advance into the forbidding mountains where the enemy possessed the military advantage, Basil called off the pursuit and retired to Thessaloniki before returning to Mosynopolis, allowing Ivats to recover Ohrid in the wake of his departure.

Determined that his latest campaign would not end on a sour note, as Basil headed for Mosynopolis he dispatched a force, led by David Areianates, to make a surprise strike against Strumitsa and sent orders to Nikephoros Xiphias, in Philippopolis, to advance into the Sofia Basin and retake Sredets, despite the looming onset of winter. Areianates did not capture Strumitsa but managed to take the nearby fortress of Thermitsa (m: Bansko). For his part, Xiphias likewise failed in his effort against Sredets but he ravaged the Sofia Basin's open country and stormed the Bulgarian fort at Boyana (Gr: Boio), located close to the city on the lower northern slopes of Mount Vitosha. By the time those operations ended in January 1016, Basil was back in Constantinople.<sup>118</sup>

Although Basil's military operations during late 1015 are well documented, the details of Ivan Vladislav's operations against Dyrrakhion, other than that they were unsuccessful, remain unknown because of the sources' silence. What can be surmised is that he came to blame the lack of cooperation on the part of his allied Serb Dukljans, and their ruling prince Jovan Vladimir, for his failure. Since his marriage to Samuil's daughter Kosara in 998 that cemented the Bulgarian alliance, the Dukljan prince, who was pacific by nature, had played a game of neutrality in the conflicts between Bulgaria and Byzantium. Samuil had accepted that stance because it dampened security concerns for the northwestern frontier of his Macedonian heartlands. So too had the Byzantines, who appreciated having a non-belligerent Serbian state, which controlled the Adriatic hinterlands north of Dyrrakhion, posing no direct threat to the wellbeing of the port-city after its return to Byzantine control. Jovan Vladimir, in maintaining his neutrality, probably provided little support for Ivan Vladislav's operations against Dyrrakhion. The new Bulgarian ruler, however, would have none of the Dukljan prince's passive military attitude. Having returned to Macedonia, over winter 1015–1016 Ivan Vladislav summoned Jovan Vladimir to Prespa, where he temporarily was holding court, and then had him beheaded (22 May 1016), despite having granted the prince a safe conduct. With the murder of

Jovan Vladimir (who later was declared a Serbian Orthodox saint), Ivan Vladislav vented his spleen over his failed efforts against Dyrrakhion, sent a bloody message to his other Serbian allies regarding their expected commitment to his cause, and concluded his personal blood-feud retributions by killing Gavril Radomir's brother-in-law.<sup>119</sup>

Sometime during 1016 Ivan Vladislav transferred his headquarters and court to Bitola, which was better situated to serve as a bulwark against Byzantine invasion from the Voden corridor than was Ohrid. He rebuilt the town's fortifications and, in a stone inscription set into the renovated walls, proclaimed Bitola "a haven for the salvation and life of the Bulgarians." The proclamation also announced that he was the "autocrat of the Bulgarians" (the first use of the title, *samodürzhets*, by an imperial Bulgarian ruler), that he was "Bulgarian born," and that he was the "son of Aron." Large segments of the extant original inscription are missing because the stone slab was later trimmed and used by the Ottoman Turks as a doorstep into a mosque built during 1522, after which much of the writing was worn away by the feet of devout Muslims. Although the textual reconstructions made by past Bulgarian scholars have injected nationalist and ethnic elements into their conjectural transcriptions of the missing portions, the "Bitola Inscription" remains an important historical primary source for its extant discernable sections. Recent scholarship has hypothesized that Ivan Vladislav moved his court to Bitola, which had been Gavril Radomir's center of operations, to win over those regional *bolyari* who persisted in resisting his claim to the Bulgarian throne by governing from their midst, and that his protestations of rightful authority and genealogy were attempts to counter arguments by the *bolyar* opposition. In any event, the renovation of Bitola's fortress and the installation of the Bulgarian court are Ivan Vladislav's only documented actions during 1016, although it has been speculated that he also renewed futile efforts to capture Dyrrakhion.<sup>120</sup>

During spring and summer 1016 Basil remained in Constantinople, preoccupied with affairs transpiring in Georgia and the steppe country north of the Crimea. In late summer (perhaps in September), deeming those eastern matters in hand, he again turned his attention to the Balkans. Basil decided to take control of the upper Struma River regions, thereby eliminating the continued military threat to Byzantium's Danubian holdings posed by Krakra, one of the Bulgarians' most intractable and effective commanders, and securing renewed possession of the Sofia Basin. Basil advanced up the Struma valley, gathering

reinforcements from regional thematic forces as he progressed, until he arrived before Krakra's citadel at Pernik. As he had in 1003, he laid siege to the stronghold and, once again, the effort proved fruitless. The Bulgarian defenders fought with determination and courage, fending off all of Basil's tactical efforts and inflicting numerous casualties on the besieging troops. After 88 costly and unproductive days, and with winter approaching, Basil concluded that further attempts to take the fortress were pointless. He called off the operation and retired to Mosynopolis, where he rested his troops for renewed campaigning the following year.<sup>121</sup>

In early spring 1017 Basil launched the latest of what had become annual campaigns against Bulgaria. Knowing that Ivan Vladislav was entrenched at Bitola to resist incursions from the oft-used Voden invasion corridor, he decided to strike Bulgarian territories farther south—the districts around Kastoria—that had escaped previous military attention. He first advanced along the usual route from Thessaloniki through Voden, but a short distance beyond Lake Ostrovo he turned southward, after dispatching contingents under David Areianates and Constantine Diogenes to continue on against the Bitola Plain for conducting diversionary actions and rounding up pack animals. Basil's main force traversed the rugged Vermion Mountains, debouching onto the lowlands south of Lake Kastoria, and then laid siege to the Bulgarian fortress of Longos (m: Vogatsikon), situated 15 miles (25 km) southeast of Kastoria. Once that stronghold fell, Basil divided the spoils taken into three shares: One was granted to the Varangians (indicating that they played a leading role in Basil's military operations); another was distributed among the tagmatic troops; and the third he retained for himself. He then marched against the fortress of Kastoria, which controlled an important junction of roads linking the Adriatic coast to Thessaloniki and Bitola to Thessaly, but its defenses and geographic situation brought him up short. Much like Mesembria, Kastoria sat on a hilly, island-like promontory tied to the shore of Lake Kastoria by a narrow isthmus protected by an imposing double line of defense walls straddling its neck. After surveying the defenses, Basil concluded that an assault would be costly and probably fruitless so he decided to withdraw.<sup>122</sup>

There existed another reason for Basil's retirement from Kastoria. A messenger had reached him bearing a letter from Tzotzikios, the *strategos* at Drüstür, relating troubling news. The Bulgarian commander Krakra had brokered a deal with the Pechenegs lying north of the

Danube for a combined offensive against Byzantium's Danubian holdings, which also involved the forces of Ivan Vladislav. Krakra may have undertaken this endeavor on his own imitative, demonstrating that his leadership authority in the regions of the upper Struma was on a par with Ivan Vladislav's in Macedonia. If such were the case, it can be questioned whether Ivan Vladislav actually exerted the power commonly associated with the position of *tsar* or simply claimed that title but enjoyed only regional sway as the acknowledged leader among other equally powerful *bolyari* (such as Krakra and Ivats).<sup>123</sup>

The specter of a Bulgarian-Pecheneg alliance threatening Byzantium's hold on the lower Danube was unwelcome news for Basil. He hurriedly dispatched orders for Tzotzikios to diplomatically stymie any Pecheneg moves and began marching toward Thessaloniki, from which he intended to drive northward and meet the threat should it develop further. Instead of taking the northern route through Voden, he swung southward skirting the edge of the Vermion Mountains, capturing the Bulgarian fort of Bozhigrad (Gr: Vosograd) and retaking Beroia along the way. The diversionary forces under Areianates and Diogenes were ordered to rejoin the main force near Thessaloniki and they plundered and burned their way through the Ostrovo and Moliskos districts, west of Voden, on their return march. At this juncture Basil halted his northward advance after learning that the Pechenegs had called off their attack as a result of Tzotzikios's successful diplomacy. With the loss of their strategically important allies, Ivan Vladislav and Krakra, judging the risks too great for going it alone against the Byzantines in the north, cancelled their own joint offensive.<sup>124</sup>

Relieved of the threat against Byzantium's Danubian holdings, and trusting that Ivan Vladislav's main force was concentrated in Macedonia's northern regions, Basil wheeled his army westward and again struck the Bulgarians' south-central territories by way of the Voden corridor. A few enemy strongholds remained in the region, one of which was Setina (Gr: Setena), in the Nidzhe Mountains foothills, which contained a palace of former *tsar* Samuil and was being used by the Bulgarians as a depot for large quantities of grain. Basil successfully laid siege to the fortress and, after it fell, ordered his troops to pillage the grain supplies before burning it to the ground. Not long after Setina's destruction, Basil's scouts reported that Ivan Vladislav and his troops had arrived in the vicinity and were lying nearby. Basil placed Doux Constantine Diogenes in command of a strike force primarily composed

of the western elements of the Schools *tagma* (some 3000 men) and the *doux's* thematic contingent from Thessaloniki (some 2000 troopers), and ordered him to confront the Bulgarians.

Diogenes advanced westward from Setina but was drawn into a trap laid by Ivan Vladislav and forced into a desperate battle for survival. When his commander's appeals for assistance reached Basil, he immediately called for volunteers from among his tagmatic troops and rapidly led those who responded to the aid of the beleaguered *doux*. On witnessing Basil personally leading a relief force for the trapped Byzantines, Bulgarian scouts rushed back to the Bulgarian positions frantically shouting: "Run, it is the emperor!" Reportedly, fear swept through the Bulgarians' ranks at the mere mention of the dreaded Basil advancing on them and, before his troops arrived on the field, everyone—including Ivan Vladislav—fled for safety. With the entrapment broken, Diogenes reformed his units and set off in pursuit of the routed Bulgarians, killing many fugitives and capturing some 200 warriors, including Ivan Vladislav's nephew (who then was blinded), with their arms and mounts, as well as all of Ivan Vladislav's baggage. Following the battle, Basil returned to Voden, where he had to deal with some unrest among the local population, before finally retiring to Constantinople by 9 January 1018.<sup>125</sup>

The impact made on the Bulgarian *bolyari* by Ivan Vladislav's inglorious flight from the battlefield near Setina must have been negative and unnerving. Needing to counter their slipping support by achieving some sort of dramatic victory, in early 1018 Ivan Vladislav rallied as many warriors as he could muster for a winter campaign against Dyrrakhion. By February he was operating before the city's walls, which were defended by Byzantine troops under their *strategos*, Niketas Pegonites. Dyrrakhion was invested by land but, lacking a navy, the Bulgarians' siege efforts were incomplete and probably futile. Events terminated Bulgarian operations before they had a full chance to develop. Pegonites sought to thwart the siege by conducting armed sorties to disrupt the Bulgarians' activities. During one such action, Ivan Vladislav was caught up in a melee that led to his being unhorsed (purportedly resulting from a personal single-combat with Pegonites) and then dispatched by two Byzantine light infantrymen supporting their cavalry during the fight, who disemboweled him with javelins. With the death of their leader, the Bulgarians ended their operations and quickly decamped for their Macedonian homeland.<sup>126</sup>

With Ivan Vladislav's death *bolyar* commitment to continuing Bulgarian war efforts against Byzantium irreparably shattered. Whatever fragile support existing for the Komitopuli's continued hold on imperial leadership collapsed as well. So long as Samuil ruled as *tsar*, the western *bolyari* remained loyal to his central authority, but the nobles in the eastern, Danubian territories displayed little such sentiment following the demise of Roman and the Krum dynasty and consequently their lands were lost. Gavril Radomir, Samuil's immediate successor, probably retained the western *bolyari's* majority support because of his military talents, but he had not possessed his father's personal qualities, nor had he held the imperial throne long enough, to cement solid backing among the warrior leaders for a legitimate succession within Samuil's bloodline. His assassination by his cousin Ivan Vladislav that brought the murderer to power further undermined *bolyar* allegiance to the Komitopuli's dynastic claims, which thereafter were exerted by a usurper from within the family. The result had further fragmented Bulgaria's leadership class into factions whose political affiliations ranged between tentative loyalty to an insecure and cruel ruler and nominal fealty to an individual who was held no better than any other noble peer. Once he was killed in battle, there existed little *bolyar* enthusiasm for supporting his eldest son's succession to the throne or for continuing warfare with Byzantium under anyone else's rule.<sup>127</sup>

What transpired within Bulgaria's ruling family and among the *bolyari* immediately after Ivan Vladislav's death remains unclear, although the general outlines can be surmised. The only account of Bulgaria's last months of independence was Skylitzes's, which lacked specific details regarding internal developments but provided particulars of how whatever occurred played out. Conjectural scenarios have been advanced positing that the Bulgarian leadership generally was split into majority "peace" and minority "war" parties, with Ivan Vladislav's widow Mariya and the Bulgarian Patriarch-Archbishop David (or Ivan) heading the former and the die-hard anti-Byzantine *bolyar* Ivats the latter. The peace leaders supposedly prevented the dead ruler's eldest son Presiyan (or Prusiyan; Fruzhin) from gaining the imperial throne, pushing him and two of his younger brothers, Alusiyan and Aron, into the ranks of the minority war party. Doubtless by this time, most *bolyari* considered continued hostilities with the relentlessly militant Byzantine emperor futile. Emperor Basil had displayed a willingness to bestow high-ranking titles and rich donatives on those Bulgarian nobles who submitted

to his authority in past encounters, so those *bolyari* concluded that their self-interests would best be served by following a similar approach rather than persisting in pointless resistance to preserve a state that, in their eyes, no longer possessed a legitimate ruler.<sup>128</sup> The longstanding tradition of *bolyar* loyalty to the ruling house died and so too did the 300-year-old early medieval Bulgarian state itself. Thus the two-century-long struggle between Bulgaria and Byzantium for hegemony in the Balkans sped to a somewhat anti-climactic conclusion.

Word of IvanVladislav's death reached Basil in early March 1018. Hoping to capitalize on the event, he immediately mustered his army and advanced up the Diagonal highway, apparently again intending to strike those Bulgarian positions remaining in the Sofia Basin and regions of the upper Struma River. Fortuitous developments rendered such an offensive needless. On reaching Adrianople, Basil was met by a Bulgarian delegation sent by Krakra who announced the Bulgarian commander's surrender of Pernik and 35 other regional strongholds. Delighted by winning control of the upper Struma and Sofia Basin without a struggle, Basil accepted the submission of his former nemesis and bestowed on Krakra the rank of patrician. Krakra's capitulation transformed Basil's objectives regarding Bulgaria. Whereas he previously sought to gain a subservient client state in the Balkans, the most powerful Bulgarian *bolyar's* surrender demonstrated that his adversaries' will to resist may well have become fatally weakened, providing the opportunity to conquer Bulgaria outright.<sup>129</sup>

Finding it no longer necessary to continue pushing northwestward, Basil turned his forces to the southwest and marched to Mosynopolis, his customary base camp for operations against south-central Macedonia. There he found envoys from the Bulgarian towns of Bitola, Morodvis, and Lipljan, who proffered their submissions. The floodgates of Bulgarian surrender now opened. One after another, *bolyari* and fortresses surrendered to Basil, whose continued push westward came to resemble more a triumphal march than a military offensive. At Serres he encountered Krakra and the 35 commanders of the forts surrendered at Adrianople. They had hurried from the north to wait on him in person. Basil received them with honors. Also waiting in Serres to capitulate was the commander of Strumitsa, Dragomŭzh (Gr: Dragomouzos), accompanied by the newly released prisoner John Khaldos, the former Byzantine *doux* captured outside Thessaloniki by Samuil over two decades earlier. For willingly surrendering the long sought Strumitsa

fortress, Basil raised Dragomŭzh to the rank of patrician and decamped for his new acquisition.

After Basil arrived at Strumitsa, Bulgarian Patriarch-Archbishop David appeared, bearing a letter from Tsarina Mariya offering her departure from Bulgaria in return for receiving certain rewards. Likewise, the high *bolyar* Bogdan, governor-general of Bulgaria's "interior fortresses," came to pay homage to Basil. Bogdan was a forceful leader within the Bulgarian "peace party" and had killed his own father-in-law and "war party" supporter, Mateitsa (Gr: Matthaitzes), in a heated political argument. As he had Krakra and Dragomŭzh, Basil granted Bogdan patrician status in return for capitulating. Since Bogdan ranked among the highest functionaries in the Bulgarian administration and controlled most of the fortresses in central Macedonia, his submission, in conjunction with the *tsarina's* offer, constituted a veritable surrender of the state to Basil.<sup>130</sup>

Leaving Strumitsa, Basil marched northwestward to Skopje, where the *bolyar* Nikulitsa, son of that Nikulitsa who defended Serbia against Basil in 1001, paid fealty to his father's conqueror and captor in return for an elevated Byzantine honorary title and a military command. Basil installed in Skopje the patrician David Areianites as *katepano* (a Byzantine provincial governor holding military authority over multiple *strategoi*) of Bulgaria and placed a significant contingent of troops under his orders. In doing so, Basil created a semi-independent, wide-ranging military command in Bulgaria's northern territories held by a trusted lieutenant who could apply pressure on the Bulgarians still under arms in the region as well as on Bulgaria's Serbian vassals in Raška and Bosnia. Basil thus was free to lead his main force southward against Bulgaria's capitals at Ohrid and Prespa with little concern for affairs in the north. He may also have contacted his Magyar ally King István at this time requesting assistance for Areianites's efforts, particularly against the Bulgarians in the Srem region, which the Magyars had controlled prior to Samuil's takeover in 998.<sup>131</sup>

Having settled matters in the north, Basil left Skopje and wended his way through Macedonia to Ohrid, receiving the homage and acclamation of the Bulgarian *bolyari* and inhabitants in the towns and forts along the way. On arriving at Ohrid, the city's residents flocked to Basil's encampment outside the perimeter wall, chanting acclamations and singing songs. When Basil entered Ohrid and proceeded up the hill to the fortress-citadel, he was met at the main southern gate by most members of the now defunct Bulgarian imperial family, headed by Ivan



Vladislav's widow and former *tsarina*, Mariya. With her were three of her sons (Trojan [or Traiyan], Radomir, and Kliment), six daughters, a bastard son of Samuil, and seven children of Gavril Radomir—two daughters and five sons (the eldest of whom was blind as a result of Ivan Vladislav's bloody coup). Mariya's three eldest sons were not present since, on learning of Basil's approach, Presiyan, Alusiyan, and Aron fled with a small following into the Tomor (Gr: Tmoros) mountain range of the nearby Albanian Alps in hopes of continuing anti-Byzantine resistance. After graciously accepting the family's fealty and ordering them to his camp and treated deferentially, Basil entered the citadel's palace and confiscated the treasury of the Bulgarian *tsars*, which consisted of a large amount of silver currency, pearl-encrusted crowns, gold-embroidered robes, and a relatively modest sum (100 *kentenariai*, or 7055 lb.) of gold coins (which probably reflected Bulgaria's lack of a true monetary economy). Much of the treasure was distributed among the troops as bonus pay. Basil then installed the patrician Evstathios Daphnomeles as *strategos* of Ohrid, commanding a large guard detachment garrisoned in the fortress-citadel, to oversee matters in the city and region.<sup>132</sup>

The parade of Bulgarian *bolyar* submissions to Basil continued at Ohrid. Three such nobles—Nestoritsa, Lazaritsa, and the young Dobromir—accompanied by all of their troops, approached Basil in his encampment outside the city, offering their fealty and seeking rich compensation in return. Basil received them benevolently and generously bestowed on them the “imperial honors” they expected.<sup>133</sup>

The Bulgarian Empire now lay prostrate and residual Bulgarian military resistance was offered only by relatively small bands of die-hards, most of whom in the southern regions were holed up in the Tomor highlands southwest of Ohrid. Those fighters were divided between followers of Ivan Vladislav's three renegade sons and those who accepted the leadership of the *bolyar* Ivats. While Basil broke camp at Ohrid and marched his main force to Prespa, constructing two forts along the way to guard the route, he ordered Daphnomeles to push southwestward from the city with his garrison troops and suppress the Bulgarian hold-outs in the mountains. Concentrating first on the band led by Presiyan, Alusiyan, and Aron, Daphnomeles succeeded in cornering them on terrain permitting no escape and then barricaded all paths leading into or out of that confined position. Realizing their situation was hopeless, the three brothers sent Basil a letter signaling their willingness to capitulate

in return for assurances of deferential treatment. Basil responded favorably and constructed a high tribune outside Prespa in Devol (B: Debūr; Gr: Diabolis) to serve as a stage for formally receiving the surrender of the last possible Komitopul claimants to the Bulgarian throne. The brothers were received in a conciliatory and friendly fashion. Basil raised Presiyan, Ivan Vladislav's eldest son and heir, to the rank of *magistros*, the same dignity that Tzimiskes granted Tsar Boris II following his capture in 971. Alusiyan and Aron were made patricians.<sup>134</sup>

With the submission of the last Komitopuli, Bulgarian resistance in the south mostly centered on Ivats and his large band of followers. They had established as their operational base an old palace in Albania known as Pronishta, located near the Devoll River in some of the most rugged and inaccessible regions of the Tomor Mountains, from which Ivats enlisted new recruits and led raids against Basil's rear areas. Ivats's activities interfered with Basil's ability to continue moving southward to consolidate his authority over southern Macedonia. He halted his march at Devol and called on Daphnomeles to assist in squelching the Bulgarian guerillas in the mountains to the west. The terrain was so forbidding, however, that Basil hesitated to commit his troops to a formal offensive. He instead opted for containing the Bulgarians within their mountain stronghold while he diplomatically attempted to woo Ivats into surrendering. Offers of rank and honors made little impression on the adamantly militant Bulgarian, who responded to all diplomatic efforts with prevarications. Finally in mid-August, after 55 days of fruitless negotiation, Daphnomeles gained personal access to Ivats by means of a ruse, blinded him, and brought the captive *bolyar* to Basil in Devol. The emperor imprisoned Ivats and rewarded Daphnomeles with all of the vanquished *bolyar's* moveable property as well as the office of *strategos* in Dyrrakhion.<sup>135</sup>

Remaining Bulgarian resistance in the southern regions of the stricken state collapsed with the three Komitopul brothers' capitulations and Ivats's capture. The elder Nikulitsa, whose son submitted to Basil at Skopje, had escaped captivity in Byzantium and returned to Bulgaria, where he led a troop of fighters in the mountains of northern Epiros. As Basil's men eliminated the larger bands of resistance, Nikulitsa's followers were progressively worn down by combat losses and defections until he reached the inescapable conclusion that further armed opposition was pointless. Having formerly been granted patrician status by Basil

during his previous captivity, and hoping to receive the benign treatment accorded other surrendering *bolyari*, he gave himself up at the Byzantine encampment near Devol, but Basil, disgusted by Nikulitsa's demonstrated ingratitude for past rewards, refused to see him. Instead, he was ordered arrested and taken to Thessaloniki for imprisonment.<sup>136</sup>

Before leaving Devol for Kastoria, Basil decreed that all former Byzantines who had been captured and settled on lands by the Bulgarians could remain on their holdings if they so desired or could uproot themselves and join his forces. He also made arrangements for administering the Adriatic coastal region of Epiros that Bulgaria's collapse placed into his hands. Besides installing Daphnomeles as the new Dyrrakhion *strategos*, he created similar commands farther south in the towns of Koloneia and Drinopolis (m: Gjirokastrë).<sup>137</sup> On reaching Kastoria, which opened its gates without resistance, two daughters of Samuil were brought before Basil while he held court in the company of former Tsarina Mariya. When the two young women spied Ivan Vladislav's widow, they burst into a frenzied rage and lunged at her, intent on tearing Mariya limb-from-limb. Basil intervened and assuaged the two sisters' wrath with promises of ennoblement and wealth. He then raised Mariya to the rank of *zoste patrikia* and had her and the rest of the Komitopuli in his custody sent to Constantinople to await his return to the capital.<sup>138</sup>

Orders were dispatched to Xiphias in the north commanding him to march southward, level all the former Bulgarian strongholds in the Sosk and Servia regions along the way, and join Basil's main force as it pushed into Thessaly from Kastoria. The emperor reached the fortress of Stagoi (m: Kalampaka) and awaited Xiphias's arrival. During the stopover, two more Bulgarian *bolyari*, Elemag, governor of the impregnable fortress of Berat (B: Belgrad) on the Osum River in Albania, and Gavra, lord of the Rakova region in western Macedonia, accompanied by their military followings, submitted to Basil. With their capitulation, Bulgarian resistance in the southern regions of the former Bulgarian state officially ended. Basil then broke camp at Stagoi and progressed southward to Athens, pausing to survey the 22-year-old bleached bones of the Bulgarian dead from the Sperkheios battle and to admire the defensive wall erected decades earlier at Thermopylai by the Byzantine general Roupenios to guard against Bulgarian incursions into Greece. In Athens, Basil staged a celebratory thanksgiving and victory service in the church of the Virgin (the Parthenon), on the city's acropolis, and donated rich offerings to

that temple. His final campaign against Bulgaria now triumphantly concluded, he left Athens and returned to Constantinople.<sup>139</sup>

One last pocket of forlorn Bulgarian resistance persisted in the northern Srem region of the former state. The regional Bulgarian warriors, commanded by the *bolyar* Sermon, mounted effective opposition to Byzantine forces operating against them from middle Danubian bases. They held out until late 1018 or early 1019, perhaps in hopes of preserving an independent state of their own. The Srem Bulgarians' stand against the tide of Byzantine subjugation came to an end when the patrician Constantine Diogenes, former *doux* of Thessaloniki and a subordinate commander of the Skopje *katepano*, Areianites, finally won Sermon's confidence in opening one-on-one negotiations. Each accompanied by three attendants, the two leaders met along a river dividing their respective forces. Soon after talks commenced, and without warning, Diogenes pulled a knife, stabbed, and killed Sermon, whose followers fled on learning of his demise. Diogenes then mustered his troops and marched on the fortress of Srem, which was surrendered to him by Sermon's frightened widow after he promised her safe treatment and significant rewards. With the death of their commander and the fall of their primary stronghold, the Bulgarians in the region laid down their arms and submitted. Soon thereafter, the Serbian lords of Raška and Bosnia, former Bulgarian allies, tendered their fealty to Basil, as did the rulers of Croatia. Basil rewarded Diogenes by appointing him *strategos* of conquered Srem.<sup>140</sup>

In early spring 1019 Basil celebrated an official triumph at Constantinople in commemoration of his Bulgarian conquest. The festive atmosphere matched that of Tzimiskes's triumph in 971. Byzantium's age-old adversary for Balkan hegemony had been laid low, and this time there existed no question regarding the definitiveness of the outcome. Basil entered the city through the great central portal of the Golden Gate, wearing a crested golden diadem and preceded by the former Tsarina Mariya, the former Bulgarian Patriarch-Archbishop David, the rest of the Komitopul family, and the subservient Bulgarian *bolyari* (their position in the procession symbolically represented their being "driven before" the emperor). Basil, his Bulgarian captives, and his troops paraded the length of the Mese, to the enthusiastic acclaim of the capital's on-looking inhabitants, the procession culminating at the cathedral of Hagia Sophia with the celebration of a thanksgiving service conducted by the Byzantine patriarch.<sup>141</sup>

## NOTES

1. Drinov, 100.
2. Zlatarski, *IBDSV* 1/2, 563f.
3. Treadgold, *A History*, 509; id., *Byzantium and Its Army*, 36 and nn; Oikonomides, *Les listes*, 356–358, 360–363; J. Nesbitt and N. Oikonomides, *Catalogue of Byzantine Seals at Dumbarton Oaks and in the Fogg Museum of Art* 1 (Washington, DC, 1991), 100–101, 195–196. Treadgold posited that Tzimiskes created two new middle Danubian themes—Morava and Ras—encompassing former northwestern Bulgarian territories.
4. Fine, *Early Medieval Balkans*, 164f; G.N. Nikolov; Stepanov, *Vlast i avtoritet*; Slavova.
5. Bulgarian historians assume the western *bolyari* began preserving state continuity in their regions as early as 969. See M. Voinov, “Bŭlgarskata dŭrzhavna priemstvenost i Samuilova Bŭlgariya,” *IPr* 35, no. 6 (1979): 5–25. Some scholars, citing the Toparcha Gothicus, *Fragmenta* (in *GIBI* 5, 296–302), claimed that western Bulgarian-Byzantine fighting erupted after 971 on the Danubian Plain and spilled over into Wallachia.
6. *Komit* was a Slavic corruption of the Byzantine title *komes* (literally, “companion”), bestowed on individuals enjoying close relations with the ruler and holding high positions in the central or provincial administration. See: Zlatarski, *IBDSV* 1/2, 604f, Pirivatrić, 57f, and T. Wasilewski, “Origine de l’organisation administrative des ‘comitatus’ en Bulgarie medieval,” *EB* 14, no. 3 (1978): 84–88, for its use in Bulgaria. Skylitzes, 246, 312, used the term, *Kometopouloi*, when he twice noted the brothers collectively in his history. John Kyriotes Geometres demonstrated its contemporary Byzantine usage in his ode, “On the *Kometopoulos*,” in which, as a pun, he compared a comet observed in 989 with Samuil’s military activities. See Geometres, *Carmina*, in *GIBI* 5, 320.
7. Stephen of Taron, in *BVIpid* 1, 159. *NCMH* 3, 584, and I. Ivanov, “Proizhodŭt na tsar Samuiloviya rod,” *Sbornik V.N. Zlatarski* (Sofia, 1928): 55–62, accepted Stephen’s implication. For Nikola’s more probable Bulgarian origins, see: Skylitzes, 246, 312; Zonaras, 185. For the scholarly debate over Nikola’s origins, see: B. Blagoeva, “Za proizhoda na tsar Samuil,” *IPr* 22 (1966): 79–96; N. Adontz, “Samuel l’Arménien, roi des Bulgares,” *Études Arméno-byzantines* (Lisbon, 1965): 347f; J. Ferluga, “Le soulèvement des Comitopoules,” *ZRVI* 9 (1966): 75f.
8. Skylitzes, *ibid.*; Stephen of Taron, *ibid.* A stone inscription unearthed in the Macedonian village of German (m: Agios Germanos) in the late

- nineteenth century bore a 993 inscription by Samuil commemorating his parents and brother David, supporting the idea that there were four brothers. For this stone and issues surrounding it, see: Ivanov, *Bilgarski starini iz Makedonija*, 23–25; *Voices*, 38–39; M. Pavlović, “Nadgrobnata ploča najdena vo selo German kaj Prespa,” in *Iljada godini od vostanieto na komitopulite i sozdavanjeto na Samoilovata država*, M. Apostolski, et al., eds. (Skopje, 1971): 73–93.
9. See extrapolations of Skylitzes, *ibid.*, and Zonaras, *op. cit.*
  10. Ostrogorsky, *History*, 298–299; Treadgold, *A History*, 513f; Whittow, 361f; Holmes, chap. 5.1.
  11. Balkan legendary folk traditions hint that David originally was preeminent among the brothers, becoming remembered as a Bulgarian “*tsar*.” See two eighteenth-century works: Paisii Hilendarski, *Slavenobŭlgarska istoriya* (MS, 1762), first scholarly ed., *Istoriya slavenobŭlgarskaya*, I. Ivanov, ed. [Sofia, 1914], 31, 59, 63, 66, 75; Hristifor Žefarović, *Stematografija* (Vienna, 1741; facsimile ed. [Novi Sad, 1961]), 2nd front piece engraved plate (in which David was identified as “Bulgarian *tsar*”).
  12. Mutafchiev, *IBN* 1, 280; Runciman, *ibid.*, 218; Fine, *Early Medieval Balkans*, 190.
  13. Zlatarski, *IBDSV* 1/2, 609–610; Bozhilov and Gyuzelev, 313; P. Petrov, “Vosstanie Petra i Boyana v 976 g. i bor’ba komitopulov s Vizantiei,” *Bb* 1 (Sofia, 1962): 130–132.
  14. Skylitzes, 312–313 (where, on 312, an additional, alternative story of Moisei’s demise was inserted: He was killed in battle at Serres by an infantryman in the service of Leo Melissenos after his horse had fallen and thrown him to the ground); Zlatarski, *ibid.*, 611f; Pirivatrić, 73f; T. Wasilewski, “La genèse de l’empire de Samuel,” in *Iljada godini*, 249f.
  15. Petrov, “Vosstanie,” 137f, posited (based on a fifteenth-century Polish history by Jan Długosz [Longinus], Poland’s first true historian) that Samuil initiated the Bulgarian re-conquest of the Danubian Plain in 976, aided by an uprising of two local Bulgarian *bolyari*—Petŭr and Boyan—and the support of the resident Bulgarian inhabitants. Some scholars (including this author) think the Byzantine lower Danubian holdings fell to the Bulgarians only after 986.
  16. Skylitzes, 312–313.
  17. *Ibid.*, 312; Yahya of Antioch (hereafter, Yahya), “Histoire de Yahya-Ibn-Sa’id d’Antioche, continateur de Sa’id-Ibn-Bitriq,” I. Kratchovsky and A.A. Vasiliev, eds. and trans., *PO* 23 (1932): 418; A. Leroy-Molinghen, “Les fils de Pierre de Bulgarie et les Cométopoules,” *Byzantion* 42

- (1972): 410–411; P.A. Blaum, *The Days of the Warlords: A History of the Byzantine Empire, A.D. 969–991* (Lanham, MD, 1994), 73.
18. Fine, *Early Medieval Balkans*, 189–190; Stephenson, *The Legend*, 14; id., *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier*, 59.
  19. Skylitzes, 328–329; Bozhilov and Gyuzelev, 316f; Runciman, *A History*, 221 and n; Ostrogorsky, *History*, 301; Blaum, 73–74.
  20. Yahya, *PO* 23, 419. Most Bulgarian historians accept the supposition that Roman was crowned *tsar*, as do many non-Bulgarian scholars (including our study's author).
  21. *The Du Cange Catalog*, 109–110; Ivanov, *Bŭlgarski starini iz Makedoniya*, 557; T. Sübev, *Samostoina narodnostna tsŭrkva v sred-novekovna Bŭlgariya* (Sofia, 1987), 262–263; Iv. Snegarov, “Pŭrvata bŭlgarska patriarshiya, 1 and 2,” *GSUŭf* 26 (1949): 1–31, and *GDA* 1 (1951): 1–26; M. Voinov, “Preslav, Sredec, Ochrida—Trois anciennes capitales des tzars et patriarches bulgares,” *EH* 4 (Sofia, 1968): 167–173. The Byzantine authorities refused to acknowledge the Bulgarian patriarchate, considering it only an archbishopric.
  22. P. Petrov, “Po vŭprosa za avtentichnostta na Virginskata gramota i sŭdŭrzhashтите se v neya dannii,” *GSUiff* 54, no. 2 (1958): 219–225.
  23. For Roman as *tsar*, see Andreev, 82.
  24. Stephenson, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier*, 59.
  25. Skylitzes, 312 (for Aron being “said to be pro-Roman”). Stephen of Taron, 159, related the failed Byzantine embassy of Basil II in 986.
  26. Skylitzes, 313; Leo the Deacon, 213; *The Life of Saint Nikon. Text, Translation and Commentary*, D.F. Sullivan, ed. and trans. (Brookline, MA, 1987), 149; *LPD*, F. Šišić, ed. (Belgrade and Zagreb, 1928), 330. According to V. Tŭpkova-Zaimova, “Autour de la pénétration de Samuel dans les régions de la Grèce proprement dite,” *Bb* 2 (Sofia, 1966): 237–239, an anti-Byzantine revolt erupted among inhabitants of central Greece at the time of Samuil's activities in Thessaly.
  27. Kekavmenos, 23–24; Skylitzes, *ibid.*; P. Lemerle, *Prolégomènes à une édition critique et commentée des “Conseils et Recets” de Kékauménos* (Brussels, 1960), 26f, 43f. According to Kekavmenos, in 986 Larisa's administrators were convinced to surrender when they learned that, out of desperation, a woman had been found eating the thigh of her dead husband. The family of a certain regional notable, Nikoulitsa, was spared captivity because he defected and took service under Samuil.
  28. Holmes, 401–402; Whittow, 369.
  29. Treadgold, *A History*, 513f; Ostrogorsky, *History*, 299–300; Jenkins, *Imperial Centuries*, 303–306; Whittow, 361f; Holmes, chap. 5.1.
  30. Stephen of Taron, 158 and n.
  31. *Ibid.*, 159.

32. For the military definition of the “central position,” see J.I. Alger, *Definitions and Doctrine of the Military Art: Past and Present* (Wayne, NJ, 1985), 21. In occupying the “central position,” an army enjoys the advantage of “interior lines,” meaning that, because its lines of communication are relatively short, it can reinforce or concentrate units faster than the enemy, whose lines of communication are forced to move “laterally” (*i.e.*, over much greater distances involving longer periods of time) to accomplish the same tasks. An army controlling the “central position” theoretically can muster overwhelming strength for a strike in any sector and at any time chosen by its commander with the presumed assurance that swift reinforcements of both combatants and supplies will be available to maintain its tactical advantage. Emperor Basil spent some time while languishing under his great-uncle’s dominance studying available works treating classical military history, for which see Jenkins, *Imperial Centuries*, 305.
33. Skylitzes, 313. Distrust flowed both ways—the magnates suspected Basil of seeking to overthrow their monopoly on military leadership by assuming sole command in the campaign, as noted by Zonaras, 186. Also see W.E. Kaegi, “Regionalism in the Balkan Armies of the Byzantine Empire,” *Actes du IIe Congrès International des Études du Sud-Est Européen (Athènes 1970) 2: Histoire* (Athens, 1972), 402.
34. Skylitzes, *ibid.* Leo the Deacon, 213, who accompanied the invasion force as an imperial chaplain, noted Basil’s impatient desire for a quick, decisive victory at Sredets.
35. Leo the Deacon, 213–214.
36. Skylitzes, 313–314; Zonaras, 186.
37. Leo the Deacon, 214.
38. During subsequent campaigns in the Balkans, Basil never again would be caught at a tactical disadvantage in a mountain pass because of poor force security. Probably in response to the military fiasco in “Trajan’s Gate,” Nikephoros Ouranos, Basil’s friend and loyal subordinate, apparently wrote the military treatise, *Campaign Organization and Tactics*, for the emperor’s benefit, detailing proper force procedure for successful military operations in the Balkans. See G.T. Dennis’s introduction to the treatise in his *Three Byzantine Military Treatises* (Washington, DC, 1984), 241f.
39. Leo the Deacon, 213–215; Skylitzes, 313–314; Zonaras, 186; Yahya, *PO* 23, 418–419; Stephen of Taron, 159; Matthew of Edessa, *Chronicle*, in *BVIPid* 1, 176. Also see: P. Mutafchiev, *Izbrani proizvedeniya* 2, D. Angelov, ed. (Sofia, 1973), 560–580; *id.*, *IBN* 1, 283–284; Bozhilov and Gyuzelev, 318–19; Zlatarski, *IBDSV* 1/2, 635f; Angelov and Cholpanov, 39f; *BVIF*, 194f; V. Avramov, *Voinata mezhdu Vizantiya*



- i Bŭlgariya v 986 godina i obsadata na Sofiya ot imperatora Vasilii II Bŭlgaroubiets* (Sofia, 1936); D. Hristov, "Porazhenieto na vizantiiskata armiya prez 986 g.," *VISb* 4 (1967): 42–58; Runciman, *A History*, 224–225; Luttwak, 189–190; Blaum, 75f.
40. Treadgold, *A History*, 517f; Ostrogorsky, *History*, 303f; Jenkins, *Imperial Centuries*, 306f; Whittow, 369f; Holmes, chap. 5.1; Franklin and Shepard, 161–162; Vernadsky, *Kievan Russia*, 62f.
  41. Treadgold, *ibid.*, 523 n.
  42. Bozhilov and Gyuzelev, 320; Runciman, *A History*, 225; Ostrogorsky, *op. cit.*, 303; *NCMH* 3, 598.
  43. Skylitzes, 312; Zonaras, 185. Most Bulgarian scholars accept that Aron's murder occurred in 976 because of Skylitzes's telescoped portrayal of *Komitopuli* demise (except for Samuil) in that year.
  44. Holmes, chap. 8.5, particularly 490f, for the chronological problems surrounding military operations during the period.
  45. *Actes de Lavra 1: Des origines à 1204*, P. Lemerle, et al., eds. (Paris, 1970), #8.
  46. Leo the Deacon, 217 (for Beroia); Kekavmenos, 18 (for Servia; Polemarh took the city after surprising its Byzantine commanders caught taking baths outside its walls).
  47. The date of Dyrrakhion's fall to Samuil is unknown, and scholars have advanced suppositions ranging from 976 to the late 990s. Pirivatrić, 82–83, suggested the possibility that Samuil's marriage to Agatha may have occurred as early as 976. Certainly, since she was his only known wife, Samuil's *son* Gavril Radomir could not have interceded on behalf of his cousin Ivan Vladislav in 987/988 if the wedding took place *after* that event. Perhaps Samuil had been married earlier to an unknown woman, who gave birth to Gavril Radomir and died before he acquired Dyrrakhion.
  48. Michael Psellus [Psellos], *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers*, E.R.A. Sewter, trans., rev. ed. (London, 1966), 46–47; Treadgold, *Byzantium and Its Army*, 78–79, 115, 213. By the time Basil took full control of the army, thematic *tagmata* (*i.e.*, professional thematic troops) had emerged and probably were the only thematic units deployed.
  49. Yahya, *PO* 23, 431; Stephen of Taron, 159.
  50. Skylitzes, 321.
  51. Stephen of Taron, 160; Yahya, *op. cit.*, Neither provided a date.
  52. Yahya, *ibid.*, Zlatarski, *IBDSV* 1/2, 655f, provided the probable date.
  53. Yahya and Stephen of Taron spoke of Basil's 991–994 Balkan military efforts only in brief generalized passages. Emissaries from Aleppo seeking his aid in 994 were forced to track Basil down in the Balkans, for

- which see al-Rudhrawari, *Eclipse of the Abbasid Caliphate* 6, H. Amedroz and D. Margoliouth, eds. and trans. (Oxford, 1921), 229, 232.
54. Ostrogorsky, *History*, 308; Tzvetkov, 144.
  55. *Actes de Lavra* 1, #12; G. Ostrogorsky, "Une ambassade serbe auprès de l'empereur Basile II," *Byzantion* 19 (1949): 187–194; Fine, *Early Medieval Balkans*, 193–194.
  56. F.C. Lane, *Venice: A Maritime Republic* (Baltimore, MD, 1973), 25–26; Guldescu, 123–124.
  57. Stephen of Taron, 160; Skylitzes, 321, 323.
  58. Skylitzes, 324 n, 338; *Actes d'Iviron* 1: *Des origines au milieu du XIe siècle*, J. Lefort, et al., eds. (Paris, 1985), #8 (where Khaldos was mentioned as a *doux* in 995). Most Bulgarian scholars hold that Khaldos's capture occurred in 1004.
  59. E. Pentagiot, *Galaxidion Chronicle*, in P. Tivchev, "Nouvelles données sur les guerres des bulgares contre Byzance au temps de Tsar Samuel," *Bb* 3 (Sofia, 1969): 37–48 (at 45–48). Since the chronicle indicated no date or the name of the Bulgarian ruler involved, scholars have variously dated the events depicted to Simeon's time (*ca.* 922), *ca.* 990–991, or 996. Our study accepts the latter.
  60. "Life of Saint Nikon," 141–143; Skylitzes, 324; Yahya, *PO* 23, 430.
  61. Skylitzes, 324; Holmes, 405–406.
  62. Skylitzes, *ibid.*; Yahya, *PO* 23, 446; Zonaras, 187; Bozhilov and Gyuzelev, 321 and n; Zlatarski, *IBDSV* 1/2, 662–663; Angelov and Cholpanov, 49; Pirivatrić, 103–104; McGeer, *Sowing the Dragon's Teeth*, 344–345; Luttwak, 376–377. As for Samuil's wound suffered in the battle, he possibly received a cutting blow to his left elbow. During archeological excavations in 1965 at the Prespa church of "St. Akhilleios," four tombs were uncovered, one of which was tentatively identified as Samuil's. The dead man's left elbow had been broken sometime before his death and poorly reset, so that it healed at an angle of 140 degrees and remained permanently crippled. See N. Moutsopoulos, "Le tombeau du Tsar Samuil dans la Basilique de Saint Achille à Prespa," *EB* 3 (1984): 114–126.
  63. Bozhilov and Gyuzelev, 322.
  64. Yahya, *op. cit.*; *LPD*, 330; Zlatarski, *op. cit.*, 663f. For Samuil as *tsar*, see Andreev, 83f.
  65. Sübeş, *Samostoïna narodnostna tsürkva*, 262; Snegarov, "Pürvata bülgarska patriarshiya 1," 23–24; Vlasto, 181.
  66. This contentious issue is too involved for our study to delve into in any depth. Suffice it to say that Macedonian nationalist claims are too ludicrous to be taken seriously and Armenian ethnic claims essentially are meaningless within the early medieval context. In support of our

- study's perspective, see: Bozhilov and Gyuzelev, 312 and n; Fine, op. cit., 191–192; Ostrogorsky, *History*, 301–302; Stephenson, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier*, 61 and n. That Samuil and his successors considered themselves Bulgarians and their state Bulgarian, see the 1016 stone inscription left in Bitola by Tsar Ivan Vladislav (1015–1018) in: *Voices*, 39; Stephenson, *The Legend*, 29–30, 30 n; I. Zaimov and V. [Tüpkova-] Zaimova, *Bitolski nadpis na Ivan Vladislav, samodürzhbets búlgarski. Starobúlgarski pametnik ot 1015–1016 godina* (Sofia, 1970), 33–34, 155; Iv. Bozhilov, “Bitolskiyat nadpis na tsar Ivan Vladislav i nyakoi vüprosi ot srednovkovnata búlgarska istoriya,” *IPr*, no. 1 (1971): 84–100.
67. Skylitzes, 387.
  68. *IB* 2, pt. IV, chap. 4, *passim*; Mavrodinov, 258f, *passim*; Runciman, *A History*, 231; Curta, *Southeastern Europe*, 243.
  69. Curta, *ibid.*, 242–243; Ivanov, *Búlgarski starini iz Makedoniya*, 555f.
  70. Curta, *ibid.*, 243.
  71. *LPD*, 331f; Bozhilov and Gyuzelev, 322; Zlatarski, *IBDSV* 1/2, 669f; Pirivatrić, 106f; Runciman, *A History*, 232–233; Fine, *Early Medieval Balkans*, 194.
  72. *LPD*, 334–335.
  73. Skylitzes, 324.
  74. *Ibid.*, 332; Iv. Venedikov, “Pürviyat brak na Gavriil-Radomir,” in *Sbornik v pamet Al. Burmov*, 144–157. Runciman, *A History*, 233, defamed the Magyar princess-bride in a racial/ethnic slur regarding her presumed physical appearance.
  75. Skylitzes, 325. See Holmes, 107–109, for the chronological problems with Skylitzes's account in this matter.
  76. Skylitzes, 326; Zlatarski, *IBDSV* 1/2, 678–679; Angelov and Cholpanov, 51; Runciman, op. cit., 234–235; Fine, *Early Medieval Balkans*, 197; Treadgold, *A History*, 522; Jenkins, *Imperial Centuries*, 322. All gave varying dates for the campaign, ranging from 998 to 1001.
  77. Treadgold, *ibid.*
  78. Skylitzes, op. cit.; Bozhilov and Gyuzelev, 322–323; Zlatarski, op. cit., 678–680; Stephenson, *The Legend*, 18–20; *id.*, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier*, 63–65; Treadgold, *ibid.*, 523 and n. Holmes, 413–415, argued that the campaign actually was “a morale boosting assault with limited objectives” and that no concrete evidence for Byzantium's permanent reoccupation of the Danubian regions exists before 1016 (or 1017).
  79. Skylitzes, 326–327, the main source, covered the campaign by means of a typically topical and undated summary regarding “Bulgarian defec-tions.” Yahya, *PO* 23, 461, simply stated in a highly generalized brief entry that Basil's operations began in 1001 and lasted for four years,

- adding only that Basil was victorious, driving the Bulgarians before him and capturing or destroying a number of their fortresses.
80. Skylitzes, *ibid.*; Zonaras, 187.
  81. Skylitzes, *ibid.* Voden's commander Dragshan ultimately met a grim fate. As related by Skylitzes, 327, who called him "a true warrior," the captive Bulgarian married a priest's daughter, by whom he fathered two children, and then defected to Samuil. He was recaptured but spared punishment through his clerical father-in-law's intercession. Dragshan soon absconded a second time, but met with similar results. After a third attempt to flee likewise resulted in capture, the intransigent Bulgarian was executed by impalement.
  82. Skylitzes, 328; Zonaras, *op. cit.*, Holmes, 414, posited that Adrianople's *strategos* was off campaigning with Basil at Vidin when the raid occurred. Many scholars think Samuil launched his last offensive near Thessaloniki in 1009 only to suffer defeat outside a village named Kreta on the Khalkidike Peninsula, but this was based on a mistranslated entry in the Latin version of the *Life of Saint Nikon*, for which see the "Commentary" of Denis Sullivan (translator and editor of the English edition of the "Life"), 290.
  83. Skylitzes, *ibid.*; Zonaras, *ibid.*, Some Bulgarian scholars (*ex.*, Venedikov, "Pürviyat brak," 150–152) hold that a local prince named Ajtóny (or Ahtum; Ohtum), who was in rebellion against King István, was a Bulgarian *bolyar* and in command at Vidin during the siege. Hungarian and many other scholars think he was a Magyar tribal prince and not Vidin's commander, contacting Basil only after siege operations ended. See: Várdy, *ed.*, 86–87; G. Kristó, "Ajtony and Vidin," in G. Káldy-Nagy, *ed.*, *Turkic-Bulgarian-Hungarian Relations (VIth–XIth Centuries)* (Budapest, 1981): 129–138; Stephenson, *The Legend*, 21; *id.*, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier*, 65; Moravcsik, 62, 108–109; Engel, 41–42; D. Sinor, *History of Hungary* (New York, 1959), 37.
  84. Skylitzes, 328–329; Zonaras, 187–188.
  85. I. Changova, "Arheologicheski prouchvaniya na Pernishkata krepost," *IBID* 26 (1968): 123–132, for the Pernik fortress.
  86. Skylitzes, 329.
  87. Yahya, *PO* 23, 461.
  88. Based on a chronologically misplaced notation in Skylitzes (329 and *n*), Bulgarian scholars mistakenly place the capture of John Khaldos, *doux* of Thessaloniki, after the events at Pernik (instead of in 995, as our study relates, above), thus theorizing that Samuil quickly recovered from his Vardar defeat and recommenced raiding in the vicinity of Thessaloniki by 1004.
  89. Skylitzes, 324–325. Virtually all scholars accept 1005 as the date for Basil's recovery of Dyrrakhion, but Holmes, 104–105, 497–498,

- demonstrated that it could have occurred at any time between 1000 and 1016. Treadgold, *A History*, 523 and n, placed the event *before* Basil's 1001 campaign in northern Thessaly.
90. Skylitzes, 330; Psellus, 46.
  91. Bulgarian scholars accept as factual a brief, highly generalized remark made by Matthew of Edessa, 176, stating that in 1006 or 1007 Basil campaigned in Bulgaria with a large army. The validity of Matthew's entry is questionable.
  92. Similar conclusions were drawn by: Stephenson, *The Legend*, 21; id., *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier*, 69; Treadgold, *A History*, 525 and n; Whittow, 389.
  93. See Stephenson's *The Legend*, 21f, and *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier*, 69–71, for discussions. Treadgold, *ibid.*, 524–525, and Whittow, *ibid.*, suggested such a possibility earlier than Stephenson.
  94. Skylitzes, 330.
  95. Holmes, 51, 496f (esp. 498–499); Pirivatrić, 119–120, 206–207; *NCMH* 3, 599; Stephenson, *The Legend*, 25.
  96. Skylitzes, 335–337; Stephenson, *The Legend*, 25; id., *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier*, 72; Treadgold, *A History*, 525; Holmes, 106, 497; Adontz, "Samuel l'Arménien," 379.
  97. Archeological excavations near the modern village of Klyuch have uncovered a fort erected on a hill anchoring a line of entrenchments spanning the narrow pass. The elliptical-shaped fort consisted of three concentric earthen walls, with the middle one faced with stone, and ditches fronting the outer and middle ramparts. At its highest point stood a wooden tower on a stone foundation. See: Angelov and Cholpanov, 54–55; Tsvetkov, 29; *NCMH* 3, 599.
  98. Skylitzes, 332.
  99. *Ibid.*, 331, credited Xiphias, not Basil, with the flanking idea.
  100. *Ibid.*; Zonaras, 188; I. Ivanov, "Belasitskata bitka (29 yuli 1014 god.)," *IID* 3 (1911): 1–15; *IB* 2, 416; Stephenson, *The Legend*, 2–3, 26; Haldon, *Byzantine Wars*, 107–108; Luttwak, 192–193.
  101. Skylitzes, 332–333.
  102. *Ibid.*, 331; Kekavmenos, 14. Haldon, *op. cit.*, 108, questioned the blinding story but thought it probably contained an element of truth (as does our study). S. Pribichevich, *Macedonia: Its People and History* (University Park, PA, 1982), 83, related that a local oral legend once current among the Macedonian villagers of Vodoča (Sl: "Eye-poking"), near Belasitsa Mountain, held that the deed occurred in a secluded field lying outside the settlement and surrounded by low hills, which had prevented the victims' screams from being heard beyond the site. The earliest Byzantine references to Basil as the "Bulgar-Slayer" date to the

- late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. See Stephenson, *The Legend*, for the title's long "history."
103. Treadgold, *Byzantium and Its Army*, 84.
  104. Ivanov, "Belasitskata bitka," 12 n; Stephenson, *The Legend*, 4, 6; id., *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier*, 72; Whittow, 388; Luttwak, 193–195; Ostrogorsky, *History*, 310 n.
  105. Whittow, *ibid.* The remains of the individual uncovered at the church in Prespa thought to have been Samuil were of a man around 70 years of age at his death. See note 63, this chap., above.
  106. Skylitzes, 333; Duichev, *Bŭlgarsko srednovkovie*, 380–382.
  107. For Tsar Gavril Radomir, see Andreev, 89–90. Skylitzes, 332, dated his acquisition of the throne to 15 *September*, but scholars generally consider the given month an inadvertent error.
  108. Skylitzes, *ibid.* *LPD*, 336, called Gavril Radomir a "brave and courageous man."
  109. *NCMH* 3, 600; Angelov and Cholpanov, 57–58; G.N. Nikolov, "The Bulgarian Aristocracy in the War against the Byzantine Empire (971–1019)," in *Byzantium and East Central Europe*, M. Salamon, et al., eds. (Cracow, 2001): 141–158.
  110. Skylitzes, 333.
  111. *Ibid.*, 334.
  112. *LPD*, 336. For the *LPD*'s lack of reliability as an historical source, see S. Bujan, "La Chronique du prêtre de Dioclée: Un faux document historique," *REB* 66 (2008): 5–38.
  113. Skylitzes, 333–334, 333 n. *IB* 2, 416, surmised that Dragshan's third and fatal escape attempt from Thessaloniki (see note 82, this chap., above) probably was associated with the uprising.
  114. Skylitzes, 334. See Heron, *Siegecraft*, "*Parangelmata Poliorcetica*," chaps. 13–19, for descriptions of Byzantine siege tactics used at Mŭglen.
  115. Skylitzes, 332, 334; *LPD*, 336, 341; Yahya, "Histoire de Yahya-Ibn-Sa'ïd d'Antioche," I. Kratchovsky, ed., and F. Micheau and G. Troupeau, trans., *PO* 47 (1997): 406. Treadgold, *A History*, 526–527, posited that Basil's primary objective at the time was striking a peace accord with Bulgaria favorable to Byzantium. For Tsar Ivan Vladislav, see Andreev, 91–93.
  116. Skylitzes, 334–335.
  117. *Ibid.*, 335.
  118. *Ibid.*, 335–336; *NCMH* 3, 600.
  119. *LPD*, 337f; Skylitzes, 335.
  120. For the "Bitola Inscription," see the studies cited in note 67, this chap., above. Also see: Stephenson, *The Legend*, 29–30; Curta, *Southeastern Europe*, 246. For hypotheses regarding Ivan Vladislav assaulting

- Dyrrakhion in 1016, see: Zlatarski, *IBDSV* 1/2, 725; Angelov and Cholpanov, 59.
121. Skylitzes, 336–337.
  122. *Ibid.*, 337.
  123. Stephenson, *The Legend*, 30. It is possible that Krakra contacted the Pechenegs on behalf of Ivan Vladislav, whom he loyally considered his imperial sovereign.
  124. Skylitzes, *op. cit.*; Bozhilov, “Bŭlgariya i pechenezite,” 60–61.
  125. Skylitzes, 337–338. Zlatarski, *IBDSV* 1/2, 327 n, provided the probable location of Setina. See Treadgold, *Byzantium and Its Army*, 67, 78–79, for the components and probable strengths of Diogenes’s force. Perhaps actions by the *Kontaratoi* garrisoning Voden led to the unrest there.
  126. Skylitzes, 338; Zonaras, 189; *LPD*, 341 (claimed the Bulgarian ruler was killed by a vision of the manifested spirit of Jovan Vladimir as an armed Byzantine trooper); H. Grégoire, “Du nouveau sur l’histoire bulgaro-byzantine: Nicétas Pégonitès, vainqueur du roi bulgare Jean Vladislav,” *Byzantion* 12 (1937): 283–291; McGeer, *Sowing the Dragon’s Teeth*, 270.
  127. Yahya, *PO* 47, 406, claimed that some *bolyari* invited Basil to take control of Bulgaria after Ivan Vladislav’s death.
  128. Zlatarski, *ibid.*, 729f; Mutafchiev, *IBN* 1, 293–294. The name of the Bulgarian patriarch-archbishop at the time remains problematic. See V. Tŭpkova-Zaimova, “The Du Cange Catalogue,” in *State and Church: Studies in Medieval Bulgaria and Byzantium*, 227–229.
  129. Skylitzes, 338; Treadgold, *A History*, 528.
  130. Skylitzes, 338–339; Zonaras, 189. Bozhilov and Gyuzelev, 329–330, posited that Bogdan held the high title of *ichirgu-boila* (or *chŭrgubila*).
  131. Skylitzes, 339. For possible Magyar intervention, see: Stephenson, *The Legend*, 34; Moravcsik, 62; Engel, 28; F. Makk, “Relations Hungaro-Bulares au temps du Prince Géza et du Roi Etienne Ier,” in *Szegedi Bolgarisztika* [Szeged Bulgaristika] (Szeged, 1994), 30–31. *LPD*, 344, stated that, after Ivan Vladislav’s death, Basil “captured [not only all of Bulgaria but]... Raška and Bosna [Bosnia], and the whole of Dalmatia and the maritime cities as far as the border of Dalmatia Inferior” with “a mighty army and a powerful fleet.” None of those operations appeared in Skylitzes, other than the Croats’s submission.
  132. Skylitzes, 339–340, 339 n; Zonaras, 189.
  133. Skylitzes, 340.
  134. *Ibid.*
  135. *Ibid.*, 340–343. Skylitzes characterized his extended tale of Daphnomeles’s ruse and Ivats’s downfall as “a pleasant and wondrous story.”

136. Ibid., 343.
137. Ibid. Some scholars think that the new *strategoï* named by Basil indicated the creation of new themes in Epiros, but Ahrweiler, "Recherches sur l'administration," 48f, 78–79, Stephenson, *The Legend*, 40, and Ostrogorsky, *History*, 311 n, posited that, by Basil's time, the office of *strategos* did not necessarily designate thematic command but could indicate a high military command, with or without an attached theme.
138. Skylitzes, *ibid.*
139. Ibid., 344.
140. Ibid., 345; Zonaras, 190. Skylitzes called the Srem commander "Sermon," but he may not have known the *bolyar's* actual name so he used the Greek name for Srem, "Sirmion." See Iv. Duichev, "Posledniyat zashtitnik na Srem v 1018 g.," *III* 8 (1960): 309–321. For the submission of the Croat rulers to Basil, see: Guldescu, 128; *NCMH* 3, 601.
141. Skylitzes, 344; Zonaras, *ibid.*; McCormick, 178.



## Epilog

The Bulgarian Empire was no more. All its former territories were occupied by Byzantine troops, and every former Bulgarian ally in the Balkans was now a Byzantine dependency. For the first time since the Slavic inundations and the Avar incursions of the sixth century, Byzantium held sway over the Balkan Peninsula south of the Danube and Sava rivers. The situation created by Bulgaria's conquest, however, raised issues for Basil regarding the peaceful assimilation of its inhabitants into his empire. The members of Bulgaria's social-political elite, long accustomed to opposing their "Greek" imperial neighbors as threatening outsiders, were now subjects of their perennial rivals. As for Bulgaria's common peasant population, the new conditions probably meant little initially changed in their mundane lives, perhaps beyond relief from annual military levies, while economic opportunities for the small merchant and artisan classes very likely were widened. Thus the primary problem in gainfully integrating his new Bulgarian subjects into the empire lay with mollifying the *bolyari* and warriors regarding their new situation. In administering and defending his Bulgarian acquisitions, which greatly expanded demands on Byzantium's government and military, a system that was operationally efficient and financially cost-effective was required.

Basil showed himself adept at dealing with the challenges of integrating the Bulgarian *bolyari* and warriors into Byzantine society and imposing an efficient administrative structure on the newly annexed territories. Whereas he had been militant and brutal in warfare with the Bulgarians,

he proved moderate and practical in crafting the peace. Once it became obvious to him in 1018 that the Bulgarians' continued resistance was hopeless, their ultimate conquest meant his former adversaries would become his subjects. He realized that the internal political and military wellbeing of his empire would best be served by ensuring the transformation was as benign as possible, and that required assuaging the self-interests of the important former leadership of the fallen state. Thus during his final campaign Basil liberally bestowed elevated Byzantine dignities, ranks, donatives of riches, and lands on the former Bulgarian imperial family and most of the *bolyari* and warriors who swore fealty to him (with the notable exceptions of Ivats and the elder Nikulitsa). After granting such rewards for submission, Basil integrated the Bulgarian leadership elite into Byzantium's social and administrative systems. Members of the Komitopul family and the high *bolyari* were granted patrician status and land grants in Anatolia, which physically removed them from their former Balkan home bases and tied their self interests to those of the conquering empire. Over time, the members of the subservient Bulgarian elite were fully assimilated into Byzantium's patrician and noble classes, and any family affiliation with the progeny of the Komitopuli (especially with Ivan Vladislav's bloodline) became a mark of honor within high Byzantine society.<sup>1</sup>

The emperor addressed matters affecting Bulgaria's commoners in two ways. Probably the one most directly and immediately felt by the general Bulgarian population was his decision to continue collecting taxes from them in kind, at the same rate that formerly held under Samuil, rather than in gold, which was common for taxation in Byzantium as a whole.<sup>2</sup> His other initiative addressed the Bulgarians' Orthodox church. Although he refused to recognize its primate as a patriarch, he declared it an autocephalous archbishopric, beyond the direct authority of the Byzantine patriarch and accountable only to the imperial throne, and placed under its jurisdiction all sees that it formerly administered under Samuil. A Bulgarian, Ivan Debürski, was designated the new archbishop, although he may have been preceded by the former Patriarch-Archbishop David. The fact that the Bulgarian church remained intact, in Slavic hands, and fell under direct imperial oversight probably reflected Basil's intent to ensure the Bulgarians would be subjected to his will alone and to as little foreign (i.e., Greek) cultural pressure as possible. Hence the new ecclesiastical organization represented

a reward of sorts for the Bulgarians remaining content with assimilation into the empire.<sup>3</sup>

Regarding the civil-military administrative structure imposed on the conquered Bulgarian territories, Basil took a practical approach that emphasized governing and financial efficiency. Traditional scholarship holds that conquered Bulgaria was divided into two large themes—Bulgaria and Paristrion. The former constituted Samuil’s core territories centered on Macedonia and was called “Bulgaria” because such was the region’s name for both Bulgarians and Byzantines alike during the half-century preceding its conquest. The latter (whose name meant “[Lands] Beside the Istros [Danube]”) encompassed the old heartland Bulgarian territories of the Danubian Plain and Dobrudzha, which had fallen to Byzantium in 971 but had passed back into Bulgarian hands for only a brief period before being re-conquered almost two decades prior to Basil ending Bulgaria’s independent existence.<sup>4</sup>

Recent scholarship contends that a formal thematic administration was not imposed on the former western Bulgarian possessions (“Bulgaria”), nor were the reconstituted lower Danubian themes amalgamated into a single entity (“Paristrion”), until after Basil’s death. Under his rule, the Byzantine army occupied the territories of fallen western Bulgaria, with garrisons under military commanders (*strategoï*) installed in crucial strongholds. Unoccupied fortresses were dismantled for security purposes. Bulgarian *bolyari* were given positions in the local administration and military of the Byzantine occupational forces. Mid-level local Bulgarian notables were retained as regional functionaries to maintain administrative continuity. The *katepano* of Bulgaria, headquartered in Skopje, was given supreme command over the regional *strategoï* in the western Bulgarian lands while a *strategos* of “Serbia” (Srem) assisted in overseeing affairs in the north along the middle Danube. Former Bulgaria’s Serbian allies (Duklja, Raška, Bosnia, Zahumlje, and Trebinje) retained their political independence as Byzantine client principalities. Thus the Bulgarians were placed under Byzantine control with the least amount of regional disruption and expense for the empire as possible.<sup>5</sup>

For a ruler who had proved brutally aggressive in warfare with the Bulgarians, Basil’s post-conquest settlement of the conflict displayed an enlightened approach toward assimilating his former enemies into his imperial subjects. Yahya of Antioch, a near contemporary of Bulgaria’s

conquest, perhaps best summarized the Byzantine emperor's approach toward integrating the Bulgarians into the Byzantine Empire:

Thus all the Bulgarian chieftains came to meet Basil. .. The emperor took possession of their fortresses, but showed himself to be well disposed toward them by awarding each an appropriate title. He preserved intact powerful fortresses, installing in them Roman governors, and razed others. He reestablished order in Bulgaria, naming *basilikoi*, functionaries charged with the administration of finances and state revenues. In this way the kingdom of Bulgaria was annexed to the empire of Rome and transformed into a *katepanate*. .. He married Roman sons to Bulgarian daughters, and Bulgarian sons to Roman daughters. In uniting one with the other, he brought to an end the ancient animosity that had existed between them.<sup>6</sup>

Unfortunately, the end to the “ancient animosity” between Bulgarians and Byzantines engendered by the hegemonic conflict that Yahya of Antioch so optimistically proclaimed did not long outlive Basil, whose successors on the Byzantine throne proved far less insightful.

In 1040 an uprising erupted in the western Bulgarian holdings of the empire. Bad harvests and droughts in the late 1030s had made it difficult for the Bulgarians inhabiting Macedonia and the Danubian Plain to pay their imperial taxes, which, as an example of poor political judgment on the part of Basil's successors, had been converted from in-kind to cash and then their rates increased. To add fuel to the fire of rising Bulgarian discontent, Emperor Michael IV (1034–1041) had replaced the Slavic Bulgarian archbishop of Ohrid with a Greek appointee without consulting the Bulgarian bishops. A rebellion erupted in the northern regions of the Bulgarian lands led by a certain Petŭr Delyan, who claimed to be (and probably was) the son of Gavril Radomir by his Magyar wife, and thus Samuil's grandson. Delyan was crowned *tsar* in Belgrade, after which he pushed south into Macedonia and, supported by growing numbers of the local population, captured Naissos and Skopje. The Byzantines resorted to infiltrating his movement and defeating it from within by sending the Komitopol patrician Alusiyan, son of Ivan Vladislav, to join Delyan and split the rebellion. The uprising soon disintegrated, Alusiyan returned to the imperial camp in 1041, and the revolt collapsed.<sup>7</sup>

A second Bulgarian rebellion erupted in 1072, in conjunction with the reemergence and consolidation of the Serbian state of Duklja under Knez Mihajlo (ca. 1046–1081). Led by a Bulgarian landowner from Skopje, Georgi Voitech, the uprising was timed to take advantage of two

disastrous Byzantine defeats during the previous year—at Manzikert, to the Seljuk Turks, and at Bari, to the Normans—and enjoyed Mihajlo's support. The Byzantines attacked and took Skopje, capturing Voiteh. After three defeats of the Bulgarians' Serbian allies, in 1073 the rebellion in Macedonia came to an end.<sup>8</sup>

For over a century following Voiteh's uprising, the Bulgarians simmered under increasing Byzantine mismanagement, their memories of past imperial glory kept alive by popular legends and apocryphal religious writings. Finally, in 1185, pent up frustrations exploded in a rebellion led by the Asen brothers, Petūr and Ivan, which resulted in the reestablishment of an independent Bulgarian state centered on the traditional Danubian homelands by 1187. A new, second empire was proclaimed that consciously embraced the models created by the first, with a *tsar*, capital (Tŭrnovo), and patriarchate. Times and circumstances had changed, however, since the glory days of the earlier hegemonic wars with Byzantium. Both Bulgaria and Byzantium were now only regional states sharing the Balkan stage with Serbia and Bosnia. After a short period of preeminence, Bulgaria fell into internal instability and foreign vassalage while Byzantium was crippled and reduced by the impact of the western Crusades. Neither regained their power and influence in the Balkans that had characterized the period of the great hegemonic wars.

## NOTES

1. Yahya, *PO* 47, 407; Mutafchiev, *IBN* 1, 295–296; Runciman, *A History*, 257–258; Fine, *Early Medieval Balkans*, 199; Holmes, 213f; Stephenson, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier*, 77.
2. Skylitzes, 387.
3. See Basil's three charters regarding Balkan Orthodox church organization, issued between 1019 and 1025, esp. the 2nd (1020), in Ivanov, *Bŭlgarski starini iz Makedoniya*, 550–562; Bozhilov and Gyuzelev, 365f; Runciman, *op. cit.*, 255–256; Stephenson, *op. cit.*, 75; Ostrogorsky, *History*, 311; *NCMH* 3, 601.
4. For two traditional views, see: Runciman, *ibid.*, 255; Ostrogorsky, *ibid.*, 311–312.
5. For two recent views of post-1018 administrative arrangements in the Bulgarian lands, see: Holmes, 420f, 501–502; Stephenson, *The Legend*, 37–39.
6. Yahya, *PO* 47, 406–407.
7. Bozhilov and Gyuzelev, 396f; Zlatarski, *IBDSV* 2, pt. I, chap. 2.
8. Bozhilov and Gyuzelev, 403f; Zlatarski, *IBDSV* 2, pt. I, chap. 4.

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